

Preaching about the Last Judgment in the New Testament?

A Hermeneutical Approach to the Portrayal of the
Last Judgment in Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15

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Declaration:

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: Date:



Abstract

This assignment deals with the question of whether and how it is possible to preach about texts on the last judgment in the New Testament under the premise of a merciful God. This question will be approached from a hermeneutical angle. Therefore the researcher will, after some introductory comments, deal with two different texts about the last judgment (Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15) and investigate them exegetically. This will form a large part of the assignment. After the exegesis, a homiletical as well as a systematical reflection will be done on these specific biblical texts. Each of these chapters will conclude with a draft of a sermon on the texts, showing what a possible sermon on these texts may look like. In the last chapter, the researcher will summarize the approaches she used on her way from the biblical texts to the sermons. A general outline of different approaches depicting how a sermon on the last judgment in the New Testament can be done is followed.

The researcher will come to the conclusion that it is possible to preach about the last judgment in the New Testament under the premise of a merciful God. She shows this in dealing with the biblical texts in exegetical and contextual, rhetorical and historical, theological and homiletical ways.



Opsomming

Hierdie werkstuk handel oor die vraag of en inderdaad hoe dit moontlik is om te preek oor tekste wat handel oor die laaste oordeel in die Nuwe Testament vanuit die veronderstelling van 'n genadige God. Hierdie vraag sal benader word vanuit 'n hermeneutiese hoek. In hierdie verband sal die navorser, na 'n paar inleidende opmerkings, handel met twee verskillende tekste oor die laaste oordeel nl. Luk 16:19-31 and Openbaring 20:11-15. Hierdie tekste sal eksegeties ondersoek word en dit sal 'n groot deel uitmaak van hierdie werkstuk. Na die eksegeese sal 'n homiletiese sowel as 'n sistematiese refleksie gedoen word oor hierdie spesifieke Bybeltekste. Elk van hierdie hoofstukke sal afgesluit word met 'n preekontwerp van die teks wat sal dien as voorstel hoe 'n moontlike preek oor die betrokke teks sal kan lyk. Binne die laaste hoofstuk sal die navorser 'n opsomming maak van al die benaderings deur haar gebruik op haar weg vanaf die Bybelse tekste na die preke. 'n Algemene raamwerk van die verskillende benaderings wat voorstel hoe 'n preek oor die laaste oordeel in die Nuwe Testament gedoen kan word sal hierop volg.

Die navorser sal dan tot die gevolgtrekking kom dat dit wel moontlik is om oor die laaste oordeel in die Nuwe Testament te preek vanuit die veronderstelling van 'n genadige God. Dit dui sy aan deur op 'n eksegetiese en kontekstuele, 'n retoriese en historiese, en op 'n teologiese en homiletiese wyse te handel met die Bybeltekste.

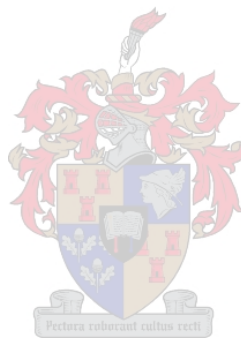


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I. Introduction

I. 1. Introduction to the topic

I. 1. a. General aspects of the last judgment

In this research I want to investigate two texts of the New Testament dealing with the topic of the last judgment. I chose to investigate one text from the gospel of Luke and one from the book of Revelation. In both books one can find many texts about the last judgment.¹ I made this choice because I wanted to investigate texts from different books, which differ very much from each other in content, genre, structure and rhetorical purpose. I also wanted to get a better understanding of these texts which I had always thought to be difficult with regard to their theological message. In order to get an idea of what the texts are about, I will give a rough outline of Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15:

The text from the gospel of Luke (16:19-31) is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Both men have a very different lifestyle during their lives on earth. Lazarus, the poor man, depends on the alms of the rich man, whereas he himself feasts “sumptuously every day”. After death, they change their roles. The rich man goes to hell, whereas Lazarus is carried to Abraham’s side. Their place after death seems to depend on how they led their life on earth. This parable deals with the images of hell and heaven after death, of enormous sufferings in hell and of being comforted at Abraham’s side. The situation of the rich man cannot be changed now because he knew what was supposed to happen after death, according to Moses and the Prophets.

The second text I want to investigate is from Rev 20:11-15. This text is about the great judgment of the dead where they are judged according to their deeds on earth. These deeds are written in the book of deeds. Death himself and every other person whose name is not written in the book of life are thrown into the “lake of fire”. Only those who are written in the book of life will not be thrown into the lake of fire. This text deals with the question of the last universal judgment for all people, for “the great and the small”.

Both texts describe in a radical and merciless way the judgment after death. The one shows the individual judgment directly after death; the other is the description of the universal judgment.

¹ Cf. e.g. Luk 10:13-16, 12:16-20; 12:35-48; 13:1-5; 13:22-30; 17:22-37; 19:11-27 and e.g. Rev 2:18-23; 6:11; 11:15-19; 19:1-10.

The idea of the last judgment, biblically rooted in many texts, influenced the church in different ways throughout history. For example, we can find this idea in the Nicene Creed (381 A.D.) where it found its expression in the sentence: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead”. In the same way, the different confessions such as the Lutheran *Confessio Augustana* (1530 A.D.) in Article 17² and the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism (1563 A.D.) in question 52³ confessed the last judgment.

The literal translation of the Greek word “εὐαγγέλιον” means “good news”. It is the good news of God who sent God’s Son Jesus Christ to earth. God became human and lived the life of humans. From the gospel we know about Christ’s life on earth, we know about his death and resurrection. Thus we know about God’s love for the world who “gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (Joh 3:16). This good news liberates us from the fear of God, and from the fear of being worth nothing in God’s eyes. Jesus Christ tells us through his words and life about the all-loving God who suffers with and for God’s people.

But the good news is not apparent in all of the New Testament. Particularly the texts about the last judgment – and there are many in the New Testament⁴ – show us God as judge who has, on the one hand, the power to give life to those who deserved it during their lives, and is, on the other hand, a judge who condemns to death.

This raises questions about God, about faith and deeds and the understanding of Scripture. How do we read the New Testament? Are the texts of the last judgment contradictory to our image of God? Is it possible to hold both images – the loving God and the judging God – together? Is God’s unconditional love really unconditional? The gospel portrays Jesus as God who breaks the law of human justice. Is the description of the final judgment in the Gospel and Revelation a transfer of human understanding of justice and judgment? Is the proclamation of the last judgment an invitation for humans to judge themselves?

The chosen texts raise on the one hand the question of ethical behaviour during lifetime. Does correct ethical behaviour on earth have an impact on the situation after death, on God’s

² “Auch wird gelehrt, daß unser Herr Jesus Christus am jüngsten Tag kommen wird zu richten, und alle Toten auferwecken, den Gläubigen und Auserwählten ewiges Leben und ewige Freude zu geben, die gottlosen Menschen aber und die Teufel in die Hölle und ewige Strafe verdammen.“ (Moltmann, Jürgen, *Das Kommen Gottes: Christliche Eschatologie*. Gütersloh: 1995, 265).

³ “What comfort does the return of Christ “to judge the living and the dead” give you? – That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me; that he will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory.” (Pelikan, J., Hotchkiss, V. (Editors), *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*. Vol. II. Reformation Era. New Heaven: 2003, 438).

⁴ Cf. e.g. Mat 18:23-34; 20:1-16; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; 25:14-30; 25:31-46; Mar 13, Rom 1:32; 2:1-11, 1 Cor 15:24,28, 2 Cor 5:1-10.

judgment over eternal life or eternal death? But what does “correct” ethical behaviour mean? Is it the work for one’s salvation? Is it not through faith alone that people are justified before God? What happens with people who believe in Christ but fail to do what is “right”? With the description given in the texts about the last judgment, we will encounter the question of the free will. Seeing the responsible human in the centre of the last judgment, the question remains whether it is only up to human decision to behave in the right way? How can one know how righteous it is necessary to be?⁵ What is essential for final redemption and justification: true faith or good deeds? If only faith leads to redemption, is faith then a deed?

On the other hand, the texts show God as being in the centre of the judgment. God is the one who chooses the day of Judgment, God alone knows about people’s righteousness and unrighteousness, and God judges people according to their deeds. But this view of God shows despair of God and does not portray a picture of the loving God. How can God, true God and true human, who showed love in Jesus Christ, who suffered in and with us, who lived with tax collectors and sinners, who is still with us today through the Holy Spirit, how can this God be so merciless as to condemn people to eternal death? How can God approve of suffering in hell? How can God judge sinners if God even died for sinners? How does the understanding of the cross and judgment fit together?

All these questions show us the core of the problem: the problem of interpretation.⁶ How do we deal with contradictory texts in the Bible? Can we treat them all as equal or do we have to prefer some to others? Is there something like a “golden thread” running through the Bible which could help us for an interpretation?

I. 1. b. Hermeneutical aspects of the last judgment

Jews and Christians have the understanding of a linear world view⁷ in common, which describes the world with a beginning through creation and an end through judgment. This

⁵ Cf. Moltmann, Jürgen, In The End – The Beginning. The Life Of Hope. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: 2004, 140f.

⁶ Maria Leppäkari expresses this as follows: “The ethics of the apocalypse [...] are paradoxical. If emphasis is laid on the dualistic approach, we find that the interpretation of the apocalypse is ethically correct, since ‘the chosen ones’ will emerge victorious from the final battle because they have deserved it. But if the believers, on the other hand, wish to emphasize the charity gospel, which preaches an all-loving God, then the apocalypse does not seem ethically just. While the clock of the apocalypse says that the time to repent has run out, the gospels’ words of love, peace and harmony yield to an endless black hole. What is left for the believers is to choose the *way or the means of interpretation* – is there a time of reckoning, or is the world just to keep going on its path or will there be disaster?” (Leppäkari, Maria, The End is a Beginning. Contemporary Apocalyptic Representations of Jerusalem. Åbo: 2002, 74f).

⁷ Cf. Winter, Franz, Art. “Weltende, Religionsgeschichtlich“, in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2005, Vol. 8, 1434. Moltmann is of the opinion that the lifetime should not be understood in a linear way but rhythmically since the expectation of the final and conclusive future of the world is not only something to be expected in the afterlife but already in

entails the understanding of the importance of life, since people live on earth only once. This raises the question for me, how the idea of the last judgment can have an influence on our life nowadays. Is the topic of the last judgment still of relevance for people in these days? Does believing in the last judgment as something happening in the “kairos” influences our lives today? And if yes, in what way are we in our “chronos”-time concerned by the “kairos”-time? How does the idea of the afterlife influence our earthly lives? It would be the task of a sermon to show how the idea of the last judgment can have an impact on people’s daily life.

The message of the last judgment had often been a message of “bad news” and not of good news in the past. The church used the idea of the last judgment as a threatening message⁸ and these texts have often been preached to make people obedient to the temporary law, or to exercise power from one part of the society over others. They have been used to make people fear of God; the fear of doing “the wrong” in order to make them feel bad and small. Thus, the message of the last judgment was a means of power.

However, the sermon as a way to bring the gospel to humans is very important. The fact that sermons have been (mis-)used for reasons of power does not imply the futility of preaching. It is through the word that God speaks to God’s people (cf. Rom 10:17). Preaching this word in a context which is completely different from Jesus’ time demands a high ability of the preacher. The preacher is challenged to bring the Bible, the congregation and people’s context of living, as well as his/her own theology together. The preacher is challenged to preach on the texts about the last judgment without bringing fear to people, without misusing the power s/he has as a preacher, without judging others in the sermon and to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the audience. How is this possible?

Easy answers to the question how to deal with texts about the last judgment and thus with the question of the interpretation of Scripture will not be possible. Easy answers would not do justice to the texts, nor to the complexity of human life. This is not the aim of this assignment. I want to investigate Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15 and to find an adequate way of dealing with them and the problem of interpretation.

I. 2. Motivation and research question

Coming from a Lutheran Church in Germany, and having participated in the life of an open congregation, I was not often confronted with moralistic sermons. The preachers were far

the present. The end of the world has already its impact on people’s daily life. This can be seen in the Jewish celebration of the weekly Shabbat, the annual Shabbat, the Jubilee and also in the Christian celebration of the Sunday. Thus he talks about the “Rhythmisierung der Zeit“ (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 157f).

⁸ Cf. Moltmann, *In The End*, 140.

much concerned about preaching the freedom of the gospel. But several times I could conclude from experience in other congregations or from private conversations that people judged others and their lifestyles with regard to their eternal life. They judged others on their earthly deeds and anticipated punishment and status after death. This confronted me with the question of grace and punishment, love and judgment. It aroused my interest in the topic of the last judgment and my search for a possible hermeneutical approach.

To judge others belongs closely to the human condition. In their daily life, people cannot live without judging each other and having a certain image of people in mind when talking to them. To a certain extent, it is a matter of survival for people to keep their life structured and to have specific categories into which they can put their fellow human being. This includes not only a structure of the earthly life, but also of life after death. At which stage does this judgment become a condemnation? I asked myself the question to what extent the idea of the last judgment influences our earthly judgement and condemnation, and whether this is actually biblically intended.

People often tend to judge others, placing them in hell or heaven according to their deeds on earth. This happens often in sermons, probably with the aim to make people respect God and follow the church's rules as the only way to God. But this kind of judgment can hurt people a lot and limit them – also in their relationship to God. In consequence, they will fear God instead of loving God; they will lead their life with the concern of not being worth enough in God's eyes. But this is, in my opinion, not the way with which God wants to free us. I think that preaching the gospel in a moralistic way is inadequate. It portrays life-topics in a simple way and gives general answers on specific topics. Preaching that those who perform “good” deeds will receive eternal life, but those who did not behave according to moralistic norms would receive eternal death, is not necessarily in accordance with the way Jesus proclaimed the gospel. Jesus lived with the sinners and did not condemn them. He came to give eternal life and not to bring eternal death. And who amongst us would survive the last judgment? Do we therefore have the right to judge others? I am convinced that a sermon of the last judgment which proclaims fear of God is not a Christian sermon. It makes people small and shows only God's almighty power but not God's suffering and being with others. Therefore my research question is whether it is possible to preach about the last judgment under the premise of the merciful God. I want to investigate this question hermeneutically⁹ in the two chosen texts

⁹ The expression “hermeneutics” is understood in this research as kind of dialogue between text and readers so that the text itself can be understood as much as possible in its own world and its “contemporary meaningfulness and possible truth” (Soulén, Richard N., Soulén, R. Kendall, Handbook of Biblical Criticism. Third Edition, Revised and Expanded. Louisville, London: 2001, 73).

(Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15). I hope that there will be a way of preaching about these texts without being moralistic. I will try to be honest and as “objective” as possible throughout the study. This implies that, if the outcome of the exegesis and occupation with the texts will bring the result of a merciless God, I will not be able to write a draft of a sermon which brings the “bad news” to people, since I cannot preach what I cannot believe. But while preaching about the texts I can – as one possibility – share the journey which I walked with and through the texts with the congregation and thus show them how I dealt with the texts.

I. 3. Methodology and approach

To write about all different types of judgment in the New Testament would be a thesis by itself. Therefore I write only about two texts, one from the gospel of Luke (16:19-31) and the other one from the book of Revelation (Rev 20:11-15). In the assignment I will mainly concentrate on looking at these two texts, and investigate their way of dealing with the topic of the last judgment. This will be done with the historical critical method. “Whoever wants to understand a text of the distant past must try to determine what the writer wanted to say to his or her readers at the time and in what sense those readers could understand the writer’s message.”¹⁰ The historical critical method is the attempt to read literature through the eyes of the people at the time of writing. Therefore I will approach these texts exegetically and use the historical critical method

All exegetical – diachronical and synchronical – steps I will be doing have the aim to gain a better understanding of content, structure, context, language, time, author, religion, tradition, origin, development and the intended effect of the text. I hope to get an understanding of how the texts handle questions of earthly and heavenly justice, of grace, of the image they draw of God and of human beings, and how they understand good and evil and the function of deeds on earth in the texts. I will also look at the context of the gospel of Luke and the book of Revelation, and the order in which these texts are placed. Only with this understanding I will be able to overcome a superficial dealing with the text, gain a deeper insight into the text and the topics, and go beyond the text in order to write a sermon.

After having done the exegesis, I will contemplate, in a homiletical reflection, a contemporary understanding of the last judgment. I will deal with the questions of whether the text is comprehensible, and in which sense and why it is or is not comprehensible for

¹⁰ Roloff, Jürgen, Revelation. A Continental Commentary, translated by John E. Alsup. Minneapolis: 1993, 14.

contemporary recipients.¹¹ How might people in our society react on a text like Luk 16 and Rev 20? What makes them agree or disagree to the text and why? What might their experiences, their fears, their oppositions to the last judgment be? What is their contemporary situation, their perspective from which they might see the text? This reflection aims to find out whether and how the text still has a message for the audience today. Thoughts like this might be important in order to understand the stand-point of the audience. It is important to get an idea of their way of thinking and living in order to be able to preach into their life so that the text speaks to them in their own context. Since I do not have a “real” congregation in mind to whose situation I could apply this reflection, I will only provide some general considerations in this part.

In the next step I will do a systematic reflection on the text’s central topic. This reflection aims to clarify the text’s main topic theologically in order to get insights on the topic which might be useful for the sermon. For this reason, I will underline my own thoughts, coming from the exegetical and homiletical work with the text, with the thoughts of a contemporary theologian and thus approach the theme from a systematic angle.

Finally, I will write a draft of a sermon. As I am not going to preach about Luk 16 and Rev 20 in a congregation, it would be difficult to make a fully written sermon out of it, since I do not know the congregation. Therefore I will only outline the sermon in its essential points, including the important results from the exegesis. The drafts should show practically how one could preach about the last judgment and should point out the potential impact the texts may have in the believers’ lives. It is possible that these drafts will not find an answer to the questions that I asked in the introduction. But hopefully they will show a way of how to deal with such texts and such a topic.

In the ensuing conclusion, I will outline my approaches to Luk 16 and Rev 20 with regard to my research question. Therefore I will include the research of Luk 16 and Rev 20, the exegetical investigation, the contemporary and systematic reflection and the draft. In addition, I will give a general outline of these approaches. Finally, in the last survey on the assignment I will I will look back at the questions I asked in the introduction and try to give some answers to them.

¹¹ I distinguish between the implied readers to whom the text had been addressed to, and the historical readers who read the text throughout the centuries until today. Thus, we as contemporary recipients are part of the historical readers who read the text in our days through our lenses, shaped by our own history (cf. McKinn, Donald K., Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms. Louisville, Kentucky: 1996, 139).

II. Luke 16:19-31

II. 1. Exegesis

In the exegesis on Luk 16:19-31 I want to acquire a deeper knowledge about the text itself. Therefore, I will translate it and include the textual criticism in the footnotes of the translation. The way the translation is designed mirrors the text's structure. In the textual analysis I will have a closer look at the content and the language used in the text. An analysis of the context of the parable as well of the whole gospel of Luke will follow in order to explain the text's meaning in its context. In a reflection about the historical context I will explain who the Pharisees were and how they were perceived in society. In addition, I will have a closer look at the social conditions of the society, what people believed and the concepts of wealth and poverty. Finally, I will compare the parable with stories from other cultures and have a look how the parable sets its own emphasis.

II. 1. a. Translation¹²

^{19a}¹³ There was a rich man¹⁴,

^{19b} and he was clothed in purple and fine linen and he rejoiced every day splendidly.

^{20a} And there was a poor man with name Lazarus

^{20b} who had been lying at his gate, covered with sores.

^{21a} and he was longing to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table

^{21b} and even the dogs were coming

^{21c} and licked his sores.

^{22a} But it happened that the poor man died

^{22b} and he was carried by the angels in the bosom of Abraham.

^{22c} but also the rich man died

^{22d} and he was buried.

¹² This is my own translation from the Greek Edition according to Nestle Aland, 27th Edition (NA27).

¹³ The insertion from Majuscule D 05 (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, 5/6th century A.D., fourth order) and (sy^c): εἶπεν δὲ καὶ ἑτέραν παραβολὴν can be seen as introductory words. Taking the criteria "lectio brevior potior" and the fact that only D 05 witnesses this version into consideration, I would not estimate it as original.

¹⁴ Ⲫ⁷⁵ (Chester-Beatty-Papyri, 3rd century, first order) and sa (Sahidic tradition) insert ονοματι Νεύης. This name is the short form of Νινευής, reminding of the town Nineveh (Gen 10:11f) and its inhabitants. There is the narration that Νινύας, the son of Ninos (founder of Nineveh), lead a splendid life (cf. Bovon, Francois, Das Evangelium nach Lukas. Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Vol. III/3. Brox, Norbert, Gnllka, Joachim, Lux, Ulrich, Roloff, Jürgen (Editors). Düsseldorf, Zürich: 2001, 118). Since all other manuscripts omit the name of the rich man, and since his name can be seen as addition and interpretation of the original text, I do not estimate this insertion as original.

23a And¹⁵ when he lifted his eyes in Hades, while he was in great pain,

23b he saw Abraham in a distance and Lazarus in his bosom.

24a And he called out and said:

24b “Father Abraham, have mercy on me

24c and send Lazarus

24d in order that he may dip the tip of his finger in water

24e and may refresh my tongue

24f because I am in great pain in this flame.”

25a And Abraham said:

25b “Child, remember: you received the good things in your life

25c and Lazarus likewise the bad things:

25d But now here he is comforted,

25e but you are in great pain.

26a And besides¹⁶ all this, between us and you a great chasm has been established

26b in order that those who desire to cross over from here to you may not be able,

26c and they may not even cross over from there to us.”

27a But he said:

27b “I beg now you¹⁷, father,

¹⁵ We find as an alternative reading: *εν τω αδη*. The *καί* is omitted in **Σ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), and lat (old Latin and Vulgate manuscripts). I think that the text of the NA27 is original since only these two witnesses cite the short form. According to the inner criteria and the “lectio brevior potior”, the preference is with the text critical apparatus. As an overall assessment I go with the NA27, since the outer witnesses are too important to neglect them.

¹⁶ The following manuscripts witness *επι*: A 02 (Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century, 3rd order), D 05 (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, 5/6th century A.D., fourth order), W (Codex Freerianus, 5th century, 3rd order), **Θ** (Codex Coridethianus, 9th century, 2nd order), **Ψ** (Codex Athous Laurensis, 8th/9th century, 3rd order), *f*¹³ (minuscule families, 12th century, 3rd order), **Μ** (majority text, Byzantine text form, 5th order) and some Latin manuscripts. *Εν* in the text is witnessed by **ℙ**⁷⁵ (Chester-Beatty-Papyri, 3rd century, first order), **Σ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), B 03 (Codex Vaticanus, 4th century, 1st order), L (Codex Regius, 8th century, 2nd order), 579 (gospel, 8th century) and some old Latin and Vulgate manuscripts.

The witnesses **ℙ**⁷⁵ and **Σ** 01 are very important witnesses, thus they speak for the originality of the NA27. According to the inner criteria, the variant *επι* seems to be more difficult even though the content is the same, and therefore the rule “lectio difficilior probabiliior” is to apply. But as an overall assessment I go with the NA27, since the outer witnesses are too important to neglect them.

¹⁷ The reading *σε ουν* which is taken by the NA27, is witnessed by A 02 (Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century, 3rd order), D 05 (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, 5/6th century A.D., fourth order), B (Codex Vaticanus, ca. 350 A.D., first order), *f*¹³ (minuscule family, 12th century, 3rd order), *pc* (a few other witnesses). In divergence from the NA27, the following manuscripts witness *ουν σε*: **ℙ**⁷⁵ (Chester-Beatty-Papyri, 3rd century, first order), **Σ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), L (Codex Regius, 8th century, 2nd order), **Θ** (Codex Coridethianus, 9th century, 2nd order), **Ψ** (Codex Athous Laurensis, 8th/9th century, 3rd order), *f*¹ (minuscule family, 12th century, 3rd order), **Μ** (majority text, Byzantine text form, 5th order) and some Latin manuscripts. Other few versions write only *σε*: W (Codex Freerianus, 5th century, 3rd order), Minuscule 579 (gospel, 8th century), the Bohairic tradition and some Latin and other few manuscripts.

The change of the order of *ουν* and *σε* may underline the word *σε*, stressing the word “father”. We do not know if the writers changed intentionally the order in order to stress the personal pronoun *σε* at the end of the sentence or

^{27c} that you may send him to my father's house.

^{28a} For I have five brothers,

^{28b} in order that he testifies to them solemnly

^{28c} so that they may also not come to this place of great pain.”

^{29a} But Abraham answered:

^{29b} “They have Moses and the prophets: they shall listen to them.

^{30a} But he said:

^{30b} “No, father Abraham, if someone from the dead goes¹⁸ to them, they will repent.”

^{31a} But he answered him:

^{31b} “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets,

^{31c} they will also not be convinced if someone of the dead would rise.”

II. 1. b. Textual analysis

II. 1. b. α. Structure

Luk 16:19-31 is structured into two main parts. The first part describes the reversal of the fates; the second has its emphasis on the law. Some commentaries underline this structure also with the fact that the text seems to come to an end with verse 26 – perhaps thus indicating that the first part had been taken from another folktale¹⁹ while Luke had added the second part.²⁰

The first part (19-26) introduces the main setting: the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man. Verses 19-26 as the describing part have many participles. In this part the persons are presented and the places are introduced and described. The story begins in verse 22a (ἐγένετο) with the description of the death of the rich and the poor man, thus beginning at a point where other stories usually end. Verses 19-23 are structured in the form of a chiasm: the description of life and death of the rich man (19, 22c-23) frames the description of the poor

if it has been changed from οὐν σε to σε οὐν in order to have a nice sounding sentence. According to the outer criteria, the witnesses writing οὐν σε are very important, and in my opinion more important than the manuscripts which witness the version of the NA27. Therefore I decide to go with the witnesses' οὐν σε instead of σε οὐν.

¹⁸ An alternative reading to the NA27 (πορευτη) is given by: ἐγεννη (P⁷⁵, Chester-Beatty-Papyri, 3rd century, first order), and ἀναστη (801, Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order) and the Minuscule 579 (gospel, 8th century). Even though these witnesses are very strong and important, we must take some theological thoughts into consideration. While the verb πορευομαι has no allusion to the resurrection, the other verbs have it. Thus, it seems logic that rather the verb πορευομαι had been changed into ἐγενρω or ἀνιστημι than vice versa. Thus, I guess that the text of NA27 is original.

¹⁹ See the chapter “History of religion”, p. 26.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Fitzmyer S.J., Joseph A., The Gospel according to Luke, A New Translation. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 28A, Introduction, Translation and Notes by Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., New York: 1985, 1126; cf. Kremer, Jacob, Lukasevangelium. Die Neue Echterbibel. Kommentar zum Neuen Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung. Würzburg: 1988, 166; cf. Bovon, Lukas, 124.

man (20-22b). From verse 24a on, mainly direct speech is used, and thus the writer uses many narrative verbs. Verses 19-26 describe “nothing about judgment, but inculcates only the reversal of fortunes.”²¹

The second part (27-31) has its emphasis on faith and action. It points out that even the return of a messenger from death would not bring repentance among the rich men who do not listen to Moses and the prophets.²² The dialogue in the second part of the parable contains almost only direct speeches and becomes very living and capturing. The second part of the passage changes between pleas (rich man) and denied pleas (Abraham). While Abraham’s style of argumentation is very down-to-earth and rational, the rich man argues desperately and passionately, with the hope that he can change something in his or his family’s situation. This part contains the most verbs. Nine of the 38 verbs in this paragraph are in the conjunctive/subjunctive and most of them are used in direct speeches by the rich man (24d,e, 27c, 28c, 30b), describing his desires but not the reality.

The text’s mood changes from verse 24b forwards with an argumentative style, which dominates this part in the discussion between Abraham and the rich man. The main idea in this part is the rich man’s attempts to negotiate with Abraham about Lazarus’ appearance on earth. Abraham argues in a twofold way. He refers to Moses and the prophets (29) thus strengthening the law. Abraham’s aim in his argument is the fact that the rich man could have avoided his suffering if he had listened to Moses and the prophets in his earthly life. He concludes the conversation with the argument that the rich man’s family would not believe even if one of the dead would rise.

The whole parable appears lively since its different places (earth, Hades, Abraham’s bosom) are described very vividly. Throughout the whole passage, the rich man is very active, engaged in the dialogue while making his request. Lazarus himself, contrary to the rich man, is passive and is the object of the dialogue. However, his rights and his importance are emphasized through his name. This name gives him status as a human while the rich man denies treating him as human. The fact that the rich man has no name is maybe Jesus’ invitation for the Pharisees to provide their own names and to identify with the rich man.²³ The parable is the only parable of Jesus in which the characters have proper names (Abraham, Lazarus).

²¹ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1128.

²² Cf. *ibid.* 1126.1128.

²³ Cf. Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT)*. Stonehouse, Ned B., Bruce, F. F., Gordon, D. Fee (General Editors). Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: 1997, 606.

In general, the writer of the text uses an elevated language, we can see it for instance in the way he uses participles, the usage of the AcI (Accusative cum Infinitive) in verse 22b and in the way in which he varies his descriptions by using synonyms.²⁴ The content of the text seems to be uninterrupted in terms of argumentation, tensions or contradictions. It also seems to not be separated from its previous part, verses 14-18, but they are rather interpretations of each other.²⁵

II. 1. b. β. Verse by verse

Verses 19 and 20 introduce each one of the main characters. The language style is the same: ἄνθρωπος δέ τις (19a) and πτωχὸς δέ τις (20a). Only one of the two men has a name. The name “Lazarus” is a Graecised, shortened form of Hebrew or Aramaic ’El‘azar (אֵלְעָזָר), known from the Hebrew Bible²⁶. This name means “God has helped”. In the context of the parable this name fits very well since he is only helped by God and not by another fellow human being. The fact that only the poor man is named while the rich man stays anonymous already anticipates the coming reversal “by reversing the normal anonymity of poverty and the individuating significance of wealth.”²⁷

Verses 19a-22a.c.d describe the men’s situation on earth, one being rich, clothed in rich garments, rejoicing every day²⁸ splendidly²⁹, having a house³⁰ and not being able to share his wealth. He eats like only a king is able to eat on a daily basis. Even in a society where a rich man could afford to kill a calf only occasionally (cf. Lk 15:11-32), the rich man in this parable can afford this on a daily basis.³¹ The description of the other man contrasts: he is described as poor, sick and hungry. Lazarus’ wounds are mentioned twice (20b. 21c), thus stressing his misery. The verb ἐλκώω (20b, 21c) is usually used as a description for suffering from divine punishment.³² The verb βάλλω (20b) underlines his passivity, as he is not able to change his fate on his own. The fact that the dogs lick his sores (21b.c) and eat the crumbs of the rich

²⁴ Cf. e.g. verse 26: διαβαίνω and διαπερεράω.

²⁵ Cf. Green, Gospel of Luke, 604.

²⁶ E.g. Ex 6:23; Gen 15:2, Joh 11.

²⁷ Nolland, John, Luke, Vol. 35B, Word Biblical Commentary. Hubbard, David A, Barker, Glenn W. (General Editors), Martin, Ralph P. (New Testament Editor). Dallas, Texas: 1993, 828.

²⁸ The verb ἐὺφραίνομαι expresses culinary delights as well as erotic enjoyment (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 117).

²⁹ This adverb is as hapax legomenon in the NT only used in this verse (cf. *ibid.*, footnote 56).

³⁰ We can conclude that since he has also a gate (20b).

³¹ Cf. Green, Gospel of Luke, 605.

³² Cf. Ex 9:9-11; Deut 28:35; Rev 16:2. This understanding is also reflected in the book of Job where wealth is regarded as a blessing and poverty as divine curse (cf. *ibid.*).

man's table³³ while Lazarus is longing for it, degrade Lazarus in the hierarchy under the dogs. He is regarded as less than a human and "through-and-through an outcast"³⁴. The mention of the dogs might have reminded the audience of the story of the Canaanite Woman (Mat 15:27). Verse 21a with the description of Lazarus longing for food has similarities with the younger son in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luk 15:16). Furthermore, the audience will detect other similarities with this parable like the two-sided character and the contrast of the two main figures.³⁵

The reason why the men die (22a, 22c) is not mentioned, apparently it is not important for the parable. Dying is the only thing both men have in common, since neither wealth nor poverty prevents people from dying. The reference to their death raises the tension for the audience as to how the parable will continue. The fact that angels carry Lazarus to Abraham's bosom has no close parallel in other Jewish sources.³⁶ Most of the other sources which have this connection in view of the role of angels are likely to reflect Luk 16:19-31.³⁷ For this reason, Nolland is convinced that this parable talks does not express the "normal" fate of the righteous but a "special translation to heaven" (cf. Gen 5:24 and 2 Ki 2:11) which is in line with the Jewish tradition that also Moses was translated to heaven.³⁸

The places the rich man and Lazarus come to are different. According to Jewish tradition, Abraham stays already near to God (cf. Luk 13:28; Mt 8:11), hence he is the father of believers and protector of the righteous. Luk 16:22b.23b is the only place in the entire Bible where Abraham and κόλπος are mentioned together. This place seems to be a place of honour, bliss and rest in the afterlife, but it can also mean an association of intimacy.³⁹ In pre-Christian Jewish literature, this expression is unknown elsewhere, "finding its place (from here?) into late midrashim"⁴⁰. It is possible that this term stands for the expressions "going to the fathers" (Gen 15:15), "lying with the fathers" (Gen 47:30), "to be gathered to the fathers" (Jdg 2:10).⁴¹

It is striking that the parable mentions only the burial (22d) of the rich, but not of the poor man. This is a hint for the different social status of the two men. Romans and Jews highly

³³ These crumbs were not leftovers but had been used to clean the fingers (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 119f).

³⁴ Green, Gospel of Luke, 606.

³⁵ Cf. Fitzmyer, Luke, 1126.

³⁶ "Apart from *T. Asher*, where something similar is found, the carrying off of the dead by angels is not found in Jewish writings before the mid-second century." (Ibid. 1132, against Bovon, Lukas, 121).

³⁷ E.g. Heras, Vis. 2.2.7. or Diogenes Laertius, Lives 8.31 (cf. Nolland, Luke, 829).

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 829.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*; Fitzmyer, Luke, 1132.

⁴⁰ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1132.

⁴¹ Cf. Dirschauer, Klaus, Gröpler, Susanne, Gottesdienstpraxis, Serie A, I. Perikopenreihe. Bd. 3, Trinitatis bis 14. Sonntag nach Trinitatis. Arbeitshilfen für die Gestaltung der Gottesdienste im Kirchenjahr. Domay, Erhard (Editor). Gütersloh: 1997, 16-24, 19.

valued a proper burial and a denied burial was understood as curse of God.⁴² Hence we see that the rich man is honoured until his death while Lazarus receives only disgrace.⁴³

Apparently Lazarus is after his death in a far better place than he has been on earth, since also the rich man wants to be in Abraham's bosom. He even begs Lazarus to help him, since Hades is a place of great pain (βάσανός), which is mentioned three times (23a, 24f, 28c). The situation of the rich man and of Lazarus changed completely. Now it is the rich man who is the beggar while the poor is comforted. Despite the differences and the distance (23b) between these places, they are in range of vision and within earshot so that for the rest of the paragraph a communication between Abraham and the rich man is possible. The description of the distance between both is increasing. While it is first the gate⁴⁴ (v 20b) which separates the rich from the poor man, the text mentions in the course of the parable the "distance" (v 23b) and the "great chasm (v 26a) between both. The huge gap between both seems to be unbridgeable throughout the whole parable, also in terms of their social distance (poor/rich, clothed in purple/covered with sores, rejoicing splendidly/longing to be fed).

From verse 23 on, Lazarus is only mentioned in the 3rd person. The focus lies on the rich man and Abraham. Their dialogue is structured by three different questions and their answers. In the first part (24-26), the rich man calls Abraham his father (24b), thus insisting on his kinship with Abraham, the "father of all believers". This verse is an allusion to Luk 3:8 where those who legitimately call Abraham a father show repentance in their lives and orientation toward God. Thus the rich man's address to Abraham as his father while having disobeyed the law is ironic and presumptuous.⁴⁵ In telling the parable, Jesus acknowledges Israel's kinship with Abraham (25b), but the possibility that Abraham could rescue people from Hades is denied (16:26). The decisive element is now not bodily kinship, but spiritual kinship.⁴⁶ The rich man calls out for mercy, even though he showed no mercy in his life to Lazarus, asking Abraham to allow Lazarus to refresh him (24d.e). In this one sentence, the rich man uses two imperatives (ἐλέησόν με, πέμψον Λάζαρον). This illustrates that the rich man is still

⁴² In many verses in the Hebrew Bible we find that a burial (especially when the person is buried "with his fathers") was regarded as honour for the dead person (often one of the Judges or a King). E.g. Jdg 8:32; 10:2.5; 12:7.10.12.15; 2 Sam 2:5; 2 Ki 13:13; 14:16.20; 15:38; 16:20; 21:18; 2 Ch 12:16; 21:1; 35:24. Contrary, a denied burial reflect the common disdain for the dead person. E.g. 2 Ki 9:10; Eccl 6:3; 8:10; Jer 8:2; 14:16; 16:4.6; 22:19; Isa 14:20.

⁴³ Cf. Green, Gospel of Luke, 606f.

⁴⁴ Herzog II refers to the gate as a "boundary marker". He draws the connection to the mention of the gate in the Hebrew Bible: "But who can forget the purpose of the gate as a place of judgment, the elders sitting at the gate to adjudicate Torah, or Samuel meeting Saul at the gate to appoint him as a prince over the people because Yahweh declared, 'I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me' (1 Sam 9:16)?" (Herzog II., William R., Parables as Subversive Speech. Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. Louisville, Kentucky: 1994, 121).

⁴⁵ Cf. Green, Gospel of Luke, 608.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jeremias, Joach, "Ἀβραάμ", in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1932/33, Vol. I, 9.

accustomed to give orders. For him, Lazarus is still a servant.⁴⁷ He asks only for himself since he suffers a lot.⁴⁸ It is striking that the rich man knows Lazarus by name (24c) but never helped him before on earth. Abraham calls still the rich man his child (25b), thus not denying his kinship but denying “the rights to a share in Abraham’s merits”.⁴⁹ With this way of addressing the rich man, it becomes clear that this one is meant to be seen as a Jewish.⁵⁰ Herzog II points out that Abraham’s answer could also be understood as protection for Lazarus to obey the rich man immediately.⁵¹

Abraham’s answer to the rich man’s request has two natures: a theological and a topographical nature. The theological answer refers to the eschatological reversal and the principle of retribution (25b-e), which was also known in Jewish and Roman literature.⁵² Abraham reminds the rich man of the “good things” (25b) he had in his life on earth in contrast to the “bad things” (25c), Lazarus experienced. The mention that Lazarus is comforted is for Luke the restoration of justice. The verses 25d (he is comforted) and 26a (has been established) contain a theological passive, referring to the actor behind Abraham’s speech⁵³, thus underlining the theological passive. The topographical answer explains that the two areas, in which they are located, are completely separated (26a). This is meant by the “great chasm” established between “us and you” (26a). It shows the impossibility to bridge the gap between these different places and thus strengthens the inequality between them.

In the second question (27-29), the rich man is worried about his family and their state after death (27c, 28a). Therefore he wants Lazarus to “testify solemnly” (28b) to his brothers, a typical Lucan expression for the sermon.⁵⁴ He is again calling Abraham his father (27b), contrasting his natural father and his father’s house with “Father Abraham”. Again, Abraham’s answer denies his inquiry by reminding him of Moses and the Prophets to whom his brothers are called to listen and to obey to (29b).⁵⁵ Moses and the prophets are important because they have already given the instructions how one should lead such a life that one would not come into Hades after death. The term “Moses and the prophets” summarizes the whole Hebrew Bible consisting of the Torah (Moses) and the prophets.⁵⁶ The fact that the rich

⁴⁷ Cf. Herzog II, Parables, 123.

⁴⁸ The verb ὀδυνῶμαι is used in apocalyptic vocabulary, e.g. Sach 9:5; 12:10; Isa 21:10; Lam 1:13-14; and also the noun ὀδύνη, e.g. Gen 44:31; Isa 30:26; Am 8:10 (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 122, footnote 96).

⁴⁹ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1133.

⁵⁰ Cf. Nolland, Luke, 830.

⁵¹ Herzog II, Parables, 123.

⁵² Cf. Green, Gospel of Luke, 608. Cf. also Luk 1:53.

⁵³ Herzog II mentions that the theological passive describes the chasm not as eternal but as functional. (Herzog II, Parables, 124).

⁵⁴ Cf. Kremer, Lukasevangelium, 166.

⁵⁵ Listening and obeying go always together. Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 125.

⁵⁶ Cf. Jeremias, Joach, “Μωσῆς”, in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1942, Vol. IV, 868.

man asks to send Lazarus to his brothers can, according to Herzog II, be seen as use of Lazarus in order to receive a “special treatment”⁵⁷. This remark also shows that the rich man is aware of “a moral responsibility for his own fate”⁵⁸ because he could have acted differently. The idea of a dead person returning to the living was common in the Ancient world⁵⁹ “with some literally expressions of this idea oriented toward the return of the dead for the purpose of revealing his or her own fate or the fate of others in the next world.”⁶⁰ Against this background, Abraham’s denial (which is also Jesus’ denial as the story-teller) is remarkable. Bovon describes the second request as a first development of the narrative parable in a gentile Christian milieu which stuck to the obedience of the law as condition for salvation.⁶¹

In his third and last question (30-31), the rich man argues very logically with Abraham: if one of the dead would rise, the *living* would believe him and repent (30b). This question is not related anymore to the rich man’s family but is independent. It is astonishing that the rich man even uses the verb “to repent” – as if he had accepted that it is too late for him to repent. With this argument he tries to convince Abraham. This one contradicts and emphasizes the importance of faith. Someone who does not believe in Moses and the prophets would also not be convinced by a risen man (31c). This answer also implies that the law and prophets challenge profoundly the social status quo and that “there is a desperate need for the privileged to search out their stipulations and to act upon them.”⁶² Bosch also is of the opinion that repentance brings fundamental changes in the behaviour and actions. According to him, this conversion is one of the central concepts in the gospel of Luke.⁶³

The parable ends with this statement, leaving the audience in uncertainty if or what the rich man might have answered. This last verse emphasizes that faith always includes a reaction in the life of people. It can also be seen as allusion to Jesus’ death and resurrection⁶⁴ which had probably immediately been understood by the audience. Thus we see that Luke addressed the text not only to Jews and Gentiles but to Christians as well.⁶⁵ With Abraham’s last sentence

⁵⁷ Herzog II, Parables, 125.

⁵⁸ Nolland, Luke, 831.

⁵⁹ Cf. Plato, Resp. 10.614D; Lucian, Demonax 43. Cf. also 1 Sam 28:7-20. (Cf. Fitzmyer, Luke, 1134; Nolland, Luke, 831).

⁶⁰ Green, Gospel of Luke, 609.

⁶¹ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 125.

⁶² Nolland, Luke, 831.

⁶³ Cf. Bosch, David J., Good News for the Poor... and the Rich. Perspectives from the Gospel of Luke. Translated by Nan Muir. Muckleneuk, Pretoria: 1993, 20-23.

⁶⁴ Cf. Fitzmyer, Luke, 1128.

⁶⁵ Nolland describes it as follows: “Jesus’ ministry [...] reached people who were left outside by the law and the prophets, and the post-resurrection early church saw the repentance of both Jews and Gentiles under the impact of the message of the resurrection of Jesus.” (Nolland, Luke, 831).

denying to send Lazarus Luke wants to emphasize that it is not by a visible sign but by faith through which Christ is acknowledged.

II. 1. b. γ. Summary

This story is a parable about the reversal of fates. Lazarus suffered a lot during his time on earth and the rich man lived splendidly every day without taking care for the destitute at his gate. The fates of the rich man and of Lazarus do not change in order to create a balance in the afterlife for the imbalance in the earthly life⁶⁶ but as an expression of “God’s preferential option for the poor”⁶⁷ and the rich man’s failure of practising his “social responsibility”⁶⁸ towards Lazarus. We see in this story how a life in wealth and a life in poverty can look like – but noticeably the roles of the rich and the poor man do not change after life because of their financial and social status.⁶⁹ We learn that the rich man has to suffer in Hades because he did not live according to Scripture during his life. “Jesus’ words are not meant as a ‘comment on a social problem,’ but as a warning to people like the brothers of the rich man.”⁷⁰ In the rich man’s request to send Lazarus to his five brothers on earth, it becomes clear that the parable does not talk to the dead but to the living. The description of the rich man (19a.b) reminded the Jewish audience immediately that the Scripture were a call for mercy with the poor and afflicted (cf. e.g. Isa 58:7). Also a Greek audience would be reminded of the calling for restraint. The injustice of the rich man was not only the fact that he did not care about Lazarus but that he lived too splendidly.⁷¹ The story intends to bring the audience to an ethical decision as to how to lead their life. It intends to bring them to a decision for the good of the afflicted.⁷² The parable is a vivid restatement of the beatitudes and the woes in Luk 6:20-26, where “the economically destitute are called blessed [...] and a reversal of their situation by God is expected”⁷³.

⁶⁶ Nolland expresses this as follows: “While Abraham is certainly pointing out the equity achieved by the reversal, we should not take this [...] as expressing the view that there will be some kind of automatic eschatological reversal of present fortunes. The fairly subtle, but nonetheless significant, delineation of aspects of the rich man’s attitude to, and use of, his riches and status show already [...] that more is involved than an evening up of the balance of good and ill.”(Ibid. 830).

⁶⁷ Bosch, Good News, 44.

⁶⁸ Nolland, Luke, 826.

⁶⁹ Herzog II writes about that: “It is not the rich man’s wealth but his callous lovelessness and impious self-indulgency that are condemned; similarly, it is Lazarus’ humble piety that is commanded, not his poverty.” (Herzog II, Parables, 127).

⁷⁰ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1128.

⁷¹ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 118.

⁷² Cf. ibid. 123.

⁷³ Schaberg, Jane, Art. “Luke“, The Women’s Bible Commentary. Expanded Edition with Apocrypha, Newsom, Carol A. and Ringe, Sharon H. (Editors). Louisville, Kentucky: 1992, 363-380, 365.

Besides this the parable makes at least three different points. By talking about the dead, it is addressed to the living. In contrary to the rich man for whom repentance comes too late, the audience of the story still have the time to repent.⁷⁴ Another point is the emphasis on Moses and the prophets. It shows that the Scripture has not lost any value, and that it is Jesus who illustrates the law through his teachings.⁷⁵ The third point is the allusion to Jesus' resurrection. By speaking to those who need visible signs in order to be able to believe, the author emphasizes that one should believe without having visible signs – pointing to Jesus' resurrection: one should believe in Jesus even though one cannot see him on earth.

II. 1. c. Contextual analysis

II. 1. c. α. The context of chapter 16

Looking at the broader context of the chapter, we see that the whole chapter 16 consists of two parables, which are similar in beginning and theme: 16:1 and 16:19 start each with the phrase “There was a rich man”. The first parable (16:1-13) is addressed to Jesus' disciples. He talks to them about the constructive use of money. The second parable is addressed to the Pharisees (cf. 16:14)⁷⁶ pointing to a use of money which is spiritually fatal. Thus we see that both parables are (linguistically and thematically) linked with each other.⁷⁷ Both parables deal with the theme of money and its correct and incorrect use.⁷⁸ The first parable ends with Jesus' distinction between God and money, thus functioning at the same time as transition to the Pharisees as those who claim to be themselves in possession of God and money. The reason for Jesus to tell this parable is therefore the question of wealth and poverty and the wrong interpretation of the law.

Verses 14-18 are the introduction to the second parable although this might not be explicit to the audience. The Pharisees are portrayed as lovers of money and as “godless materialists whose religion is only a facade”⁷⁹. Verse 15 describes the Pharisees as people who justify themselves before humans instead of before God. They seem to have a theology where God and money are “comfortably joined”⁸⁰. They believe that obeying God means to become rich and to win wars (cf. Deut 28: 3-4; Ps 1:3-4). Prosperity was for them to be a clear sign of

⁷⁴ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 112.

⁷⁵ Cf. Mt 5:17.

⁷⁶ Against Bovon who sees the parable addressed to rich pagans and not to Jews. (Bovon, Lukas, 113).

⁷⁷ Cf. Nolland, Luke, 825.

⁷⁸ Cf. Craddock, Fred B., Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Luke. James Luther Mays (Editor), Paul J. Achtemeier (New Testament Editor). Louisville, Kentucky: 1990, 189.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 192.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

God's favour, poverty a sign of God's punishment. They justify their belief, their earthly condition and their love of money with the law and the prophets according to the principle "the righteous prosper, the poor suffer" as evidence of God's favour for their understanding and living of the law and the prophets.

The rich man in the parable is a good portrayal of a man with whom the Pharisees can identify.⁸¹ Perhaps this is also the reason why Jesus did not give him a proper name. For the Pharisees, Lazarus' poverty is a clear sign for God's punishment.

In telling the parable and addressing the Pharisees, Jesus positions himself clearly against this theology (v 15). He corrects them by means of Scripture, proclaiming a proper reading of Scripture (17). Verse 31 concludes what has been introduced in verse 14. "Apparently Luke has taken a popular and familiar story and developed it into a strong polemic on the proper interpretation of Scripture."⁸² The polemic is that the rich man himself (identified with the rich Pharisees) is judged according to Scripture with the same means he had been justifying himself for his wealth. Luke hints in verse 16 to the law (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 15:7-11) and the prophets (Isa 58:6-8), which indicates clearly that a "good" life according to Scripture should include the engagement for the poor and the suffering. In verses 16-18, Jesus proves that he is able to interpret Scripture. This is the implicit insistence that the law does not speak for itself and is susceptible to erroneous appropriation. In applying this to verses 19-31, we see that Jesus wants to underline the importance of living in this life according to the law and the prophets.

Whereas the whole chapter 16 is about the correct and incorrect use of money, faith and a life according to Scripture, chapter 17 emphasizes different topics as e.g. forgiveness, the healing of ten lepers and the coming of the kingdom. Thus the parable is well embedded in chapter 16 but chapter 17 starts with new topics.

II. 1. c. β. The context of the gospel of Luke

The parable Luk 16:19-31 is part of the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27) as "literary creation of Luke"⁸³ as Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.⁸⁴ Probably the Travel Narrative is taken from Q, a source, which was also available to the author of Matthew, and Luke's (probably oral and

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.* 196.

⁸² *Ibid.* 195.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 209.

⁸⁴ Mentioned in 9:51; 9:57; 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11.

written) source “L”, material that was only available for Luke.⁸⁵ The writing of the gospel is usually dated around 85-90 A.D.⁸⁶ which was “a time of particular crisis for the young Christian church.”⁸⁷

Luk 16:19-31 gives a picture of the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus being literally the rich man’s neighbour. Hence the parable can be understood as an allusion to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luk 10:25-37).⁸⁸ Looking at the context of Luk 16:19-31, we see that the Pharisees blame Jesus for relaxing the law (e.g. his choice of table companions, cf. Luk 5:30) and Jesus blames the Pharisees for not being obedient to Scripture since they care about their socio-religious status (cf. 16:13).⁸⁹ Furthermore, Luke is very concerned about showing that Jesus’ sayings and deeds are in accordance with Scripture (Luk 24:25-27, 44-47; Acts 2:16-36). For Luke obedience to the law clearly has the ethical dimension of the disposition of wealth on behalf of the needy.

Luke, the non-Jew, wrote mainly for Greek speaking Christians of Gentile background. It seems that he did not only write for one specific group but had different communities in mind.⁹⁰ In his writings, he shows a special concern for underprivileged members of the society.⁹¹ Hence, in the Lucan Christology, Jesus is portrayed as saviour of the poor, sinners, the sick and socially rejected. Luke places certain categories of people more in the foreground than the other evangelists. This can be seen in many texts, but especially in some of Luke’s parables and Luk 16:19-31 is one of these parables.⁹²

Another theme which goes right through the whole gospel of Luke is the motif of repentance, mentioned also in Luk 16:30. The Lukan theme of repentance of sins is to be understood that people are guilty in terms of their attitude and behaviour towards others.⁹³ In this way, the priest and Levite did not show concern about the man who had been robbed (Luk 10:25-37), the lost son had only thought of himself and his own pleasure (Luk 15:11-32) and the rich man ignored Lazarus at his gate (Luk 16:19-31). Sin is thus understood in terms of the result that a certain action has for people.⁹⁴ Luke shows in his gospel that Jesus does not

⁸⁵ Cf. Schaberg, Art. “Luke“, 364.

⁸⁶ Cf. Schaberg, Art. “Luke“, 366; Kremer, *Lukasevangelium*, 13; Bosch, *Good News*, 2.

⁸⁷ Bosch, *Good News*, 2.

⁸⁸ Cf. Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 599.

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.* 600.

⁹⁰ Cf. Bosch, *Good News*, 2.

⁹¹ Cf. Burkett, Delbert, *An Introduction in the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity*. Cambridge: 2002, 195; Bosch, *Good News*, 20. Bosch classifies these members of the society into four categories: (1) the lost ones, (2) the poor and all who are discriminated against, (3) the sick and demon possessed, (4) outsiders (cf. Bosch, *Good News*, 19f).

⁹² Cf. Luk 12:13-21; 15:11-32; 16:1-9; 18:18-27, cf. also Luk 1:53 and 4:18.

⁹³ Cf. Bosch, *Good News*, 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

offer cheap mercy but changes lives “with accompanying fundamental changes in the behaviour and actions of the persons who have repented.”⁹⁵ Luke makes sure that salvation will only come through repentance and true faith in Christ. This repentance should manifest itself in taking pity on the poor and afflicted. This is one of the themes and aims of the whole gospel of Luke, introduced already in Luk 1:4.⁹⁶ Thus we see that the parable is well embedded content wise in the whole book. Therefore we are also able to find some traces of Lucan redaction⁹⁷ in the text.

II. 1. d. Genre of Luk 16:19-31

Luk 16:19-31 is an invitation for good deeds. According to Nolland the parable invites its readers “to learn from the disaster experienced by the central character of the tale”⁹⁸. In this sense, it is an invitation for repentance and the ethics of Jesus’ first disciples. Thus the form of the text can be classified as a narrative parable setting an example.⁹⁹ Characteristic for a narrative parable is that it is freely invented, portraying an example, which should be generalized by the audience. It is noticeable that in the New Testament only the gospel of Luke has some narrative parables.¹⁰⁰ Often Luke used a parable in order to explain and develop some “abstract” ideas in a concrete manner. In an oral culture, as we find it at Jesus’ time, this kind of story-telling was probably more likely to be understood than a theoretical discussion. Thus we can understand Luk 16:19-31 as concretisation of Jesus’ previous words.

Luke’s purpose when writing the gospel was not to provide a detailed report “but the structuring of the tradition in such a way that it would contain a message and a challenge for his contemporaries.”¹⁰¹ The parable wants to emphasize the fact that Jesus’ ministry – and thus God’s ministry – was always a ministry characterized by a “deep concern for those

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Cf. Kremer, *Lukasevangelium*, 11.

⁹⁷ These traces are e.g. verses 19a (cf 16:1), 20a (cf 1:5, 10:38, Acts 8:9, 9:33, 10:1, 16:1), 22a, 23a. Especially the last verses (30-31) are from the Lucan redaction. This can be seen in the use of the vocabulary (μετανόω), the syntax (ὁὐ ἐῖπεν) and the theology that the Hebrew Bible already announces Jesus’ resurrection. Luk 16:30-31 is thus in line with Luk 24:44-46 (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 112; Bosch, *Good News*, 65, Nolland, *Luke*, 827). Apparently, Luke wants to emphasize that the meeting with the risen one needs an explanation from Scripture (cf. Dirschauer/Gröpler, *Gottesdienstpraxis*, 21). Luke might have worked over the text he inherited from his source (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 112) maybe because he wanted to give the text a Christian accent. We also find a huge amount of non-Lucan formulation (cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1125). It was probably the author of this source who gave the oral narration a literal form (cf. Bovon, Lukas, 113).

⁹⁸ Nolland, *Luke*, 827.

⁹⁹ Bovon calls it a “Beispielzählung” (Bovon, Lukas, 109; 112).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. 10:30-37; 12:16-21; 16:19-31.

¹⁰¹ Bosch, *Good News*, 16.

banished to the fringes of humanity”¹⁰². Thus the parable wants to encourage the audience to think about God’s “preferential option for the poor”¹⁰³. Luke wants to re-structure the audiences’ understanding of tradition, faith and the interpretation of Scripture. The parable intends to make the audience aware of the inner significance of what happened. In this way, the parable turns the world of the implied audience upside down.

II. 1. e. Historical context

II. 1. e. α. The Pharisees

The parable is addressed to the Pharisees (cf. 16:14f). The parable tries to be very general in view of the rich man who is given no name so that the Pharisees might identify with him. This and the fact that the Pharisees resemble the rich man in the parable in view of wealth and observance of Scripture (in terms of the purity rules) open the space for them to feel addressed by Jesus’ words. Thus the parable is well generalized in purpose.

The Pharisees were one of the leading parties amongst the religious groups in Israel before and after the destruction of the temple (ca. 70 A.D.).¹⁰⁴ They alone survived the crisis of the Jewish war “and succeeded in regrouping after the war”¹⁰⁵. That can be put down to the fact that the Pharisees were independent from the Temple. Their cult was based in the synagogues which were widespread in Israel and beyond. Most of the synagogues survived the war which was mainly aimed against Jerusalem.¹⁰⁶ The Pharisees were known for their accurate observance of not only Scripture but also the tradition, which had been seen as amendment to the law. In a world after the war, where Judaism was not self-evident anymore, they became even more conservative in terms of observance to the law. For them, holiness “meant separation from the ordinary people and in particular from everyone and everything that could be considered to be unclean, even if it was isolation in the midst of the community.”¹⁰⁷ For this reason, and because they were convinced that the “terrible condition”¹⁰⁸ in the country came from the fact that the Jews no longer knew the law and obeyed the commandments, the Pharisees elevated themselves above the ordinary people. They felt that “the existence of the Jewish people and religion was entirely dependent on them [...] and they decided to do

¹⁰² Ibid. 19.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 33.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Baumgarten, Albert I., Art. ”Pharisäer“, in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2003, Vol. 6, 1262.

¹⁰⁵ Bosch, Good News, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. ibid. 6.

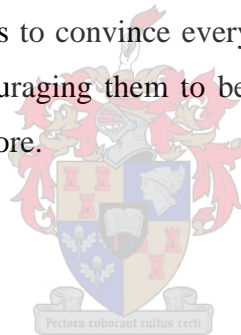
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

everything in their power to ensure this.”¹⁰⁹ But due to their dedication to the law and their good organisation, the Pharisees had a great influence in society and were respected by the people.¹¹⁰ Thus they took a very decisive role in Jewish society in view of the reconstruction of Jewish life.¹¹¹

II. 1. e. β. The expectation of the coming of Christ

In order to figure out the possible typical situation in which the parable of Luk 16:19-31 was told, we have to take into consideration that the text had been written in the first century A.D. with the expectation that the risen Christ would soon come back for the redemption of the world. This – the so called parousia – had not taken place up to the time of writing. Luke wants to show to his readers that “the absence of the earthly Jesus does not leave the disciples in a hopeless situation [...]. Jesus is still in the midst of the community, through his ‘name’ and the power of the Spirit”¹¹². Luke tries – as we can see it in verse 31 – to convince people of the Christian faith. The text hopes to convince everybody to repent and lead a life that is based on Scripture, as well as encouraging them to believe that Christ rose from the dead, even though he cannot be seen anymore.



II. 1. e. γ. Wealth and poverty

The gospel of Luke considers the topic of wealth and poverty in many paragraphs.¹¹³ It seems as if “the poor” was the most important category for Luke. Bosch mentions that “whenever he gives a list of people who suffer [...], he places the poor at the head of the list as a kind of overall category”¹¹⁴. These many references to poor and rich are a strong hint that amongst the Christians to whom he wrote social imbalance was the order of the day. Most probably the rich Christians paid little attention to their calling with regard to the poor.¹¹⁵ Poverty at the time of Jesus – and also at the time of Luke – meant being economically poor. Luke uses this concept for people who are as poor as beggars or for the destitute.¹¹⁶ We can discover that in

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 12.

¹¹⁰ Cf. ibid. 7.

¹¹¹ Cf. Baumgarten, Art. “Pharisäer“, 1263.

¹¹² Bosch, Good News, 15.

¹¹³ Cf. e.g. 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:1.21.22; 18:23; 18:25 par; 19:2; 21:1 (par Mar 12:41).

¹¹⁴ Bosch, Good News, 32. For instance Luk 4:18; 6:20; 14:13; 14:21.

¹¹⁵ Cf. ibid. 33.

¹¹⁶ Cf. ibid. 35.

many of the Lucan descriptions, parables and verses about wealth¹¹⁷ the rich people are in fact Jesus' opponents. They are primarily those who exploit the poor while they maintain a lifestyle of pleasure and are "slaves and worshippers of Mammon"¹¹⁸. Bosch describes that the rich are owned by their money¹¹⁹. They are "full of self-consciousness about their own righteousness and [...] therefore [they] look down on others."¹²⁰ That is why their wealth hinders them in following Jesus. In the sense that the rich are only able to use their money for themselves and are arrogant, misusing their power, wealth is negatively understood in the gospel of Luke.¹²¹ However, this does not exclude God's compassion for the rich.¹²²

By having a look at the description of the clothes of the rich man in the parable, we see that these clothes represent the man's social status. Luke was interested in providing all necessary details ("he was clothed in purple and fine linen", verse 19) in order to show an honourable person. Wearing coloured clothes was regarded as highest luxury. Especially clothes in purple-colour had traditionally been associated with royal power in the East and in Roman armies, but it was also associated with sin since it was the colour of blood.¹²³ The description of the rich man's clothes insinuates that he lived like a king¹²⁴ or even a god¹²⁵. It was also "a sign of highest opulence"¹²⁶ to wear white garments underneath a purple robe as it is described in verse 19b. The use of white linen (so called "byssus") was formally restricted to priests on certain occasions.¹²⁷ The fact that the poor Lazarus lies at the gate of the rich man, implies that the rich man also has a house. With this description, "Jesus has sketched the life of the urban elite whose 'houses' (oikoi) control the political and economic life of the pre-industrial city and its surrounding countryside."¹²⁸

In contrary to the description of the rich man's cloth, we see that Lazarus' clothes are not mentioned. In Jewish eyes at this time, nakedness was regarded as a lack of human status and thus "utterly unacceptable"¹²⁹. The dogs coming to lick Lazarus' sores express his weakness

¹¹⁷ E.g. Luk 18:18-27; 21:1-4; 16:19-31; 19:1-10; 14:12ff.

¹¹⁸ Bosch, Good News, 39.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 40.

¹²¹ Cf. Hauck/Kasch, Art. "πλοῦτος, πλούσιος, πλουτέω, πλουτίζω", in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1959, Vol. VI, 326.

¹²² Cf. Bosch, Good News, 44. In his book: "Good News for the Poor ... and the Rich", Bosch underlines that "the terrible judgment of the rich is not irrevocable". Luke wants to motivate the rich to a conversion which is in line with Jesus' social message (*ibid.* 41).

¹²³ Cf. Hamel, Gildas, Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine, First Three Centuries C. E. Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 23. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: 1989, 88.

¹²⁴ Cf. Fitzmyer, Luke, 1130; Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 88.

¹²⁵ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 117.

¹²⁶ Green, Gospel of Luke, 605. Cf. also Hamel: "The most impressive and rich clothing was a white tunic and a cloak in sold purple." (Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 88).

¹²⁷ Cf. Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 93.

¹²⁸ Herzog II, Parables, 118.

¹²⁹ Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 73.

and humiliation. This shows his deep misery and shame since Lazarus has to tolerate the contact with these animals. In the old Orient, dogs had always been seen as impure.¹³⁰ This picture illustrates again that Lazarus had been regarded as sinner who had been punished by God. In the Hebrew Bible, we find another story about dogs licking someone's wounds. In 1 Kings 21:19 the wounds of the sinner Ahab are licked by dogs.¹³¹ It seems as if Lazarus was completely subject to God's judgment.¹³²

In the different cultures, the topic of poverty and its connection with people's social status is seen differently. Whereas the Greek culture and theology did not see poverty as a virtue to achieve, and the mention of poverty implied a lack of culture, Judaism had always emphasized its God as a protector of the poor.¹³³ Thus, being poor in Jewish circles was seen as being close to God. Although, of course, becoming poor was seen as great misery to be feared, poverty was seen as something that even suited Israel.¹³⁴ But the basic contrast between Jewish and Greco-Roman concepts of poverty does not necessarily mean a difference in the attitude of mind. The mere existence of poverty within the Jewish context where God was supposed to be on the side of the poor, had to be explained. Rich people, and rabbis, did this in order to justify their wealth and the poverty of others. One of these explanations¹³⁵ was the spiritual explanation. Material poverty was seen as punishment by God.¹³⁶ Poverty was regarded as poverty in the relationship to God, as the wage of sin. Sin was defined as the lack of the observance of precepts including the oral Laws. This explanation had been applied to the whole country, saying that Israel was spiritually poor since it did not properly observe the commandments, but it had also been applied to the individual. The reason why they were poor was simply because of their own sin.¹³⁷

As a consequence of sin, the poor became impure. Thus impurity was related to a certain physical appearance, as it is exemplarily described in Luk 16:20. The description of Lazarus' sores underlines his poverty and therefore sinfulness in the eyes of the Jews and his impurity. This (spiritual) impurity led to social discrimination and to its theological justification. A poor

¹³⁰ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 120. Cf. also Ex 22:30; 1 Ki 22:38; Mat 7:6; 15:36; Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15.

¹³¹ Thus says the Lord: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood." (1 Ki 21:19).

¹³² Cf. Michel, Art. "Κύων", in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1938, Vol. III, 1102.

¹³³ Cf. e.g. Ex 22:24-26; 23:6ff; Lev 19:9ff; 25:36; Dtn 14:28f; 15:7-11; 16:11-14; 23:20ff; 24:14f; 26:12f; Prov 29:14.

¹³⁴ Cf. Hamel, 194. Hamel also mentions: „A mention of poverty was sufficiently discrediting in Greek eyes, as in Roman eyes, and this was one of the major criticisms against Christianity. But this is not true of Jews, who resorted to other devices in order to mark social class and rank." (Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 195).

¹³⁵ For other explanations see Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 197ff.

¹³⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 201.

¹³⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 198.

person could be in a difficult situation “without proper Torah-intelligence and impure because poor, and yet asked to accept his misery as just punishment for these failures.”¹³⁸

Another cause of poverty and wealth was the connection with either the sin or good deeds of the ancestors. One could be rich or poor because of the ancestors’ (spiritual) merit or sins. In connection with this, Abraham played a decisive role. He was seen as “the figure at the center of the ‘social debate’”¹³⁹. Since Abraham was exceptionally God-fearing and rich,¹⁴⁰ the rich Jews at that time understood themselves as Abraham’s successors. Wealth was seen as effect of individual purity and Torah-learning. In Luk 16:19-31 we see therefore that the “story operated on the assumption that extreme poverty meant extreme distance from Abraham and extreme wealth the reverse.”¹⁴¹

“The reversal of [the] expected fates [of the rich man and Lazarus] undermined not simply the audiences’ view of the afterlife but, more importantly, their assumption that present circumstances could be used as a reliable guide for discerning God’s judgments or [...] that social class was an indicator of divine blessing or honorable status.”¹⁴² Thus we see that the story completely changes the worldview. The rich man (being socially on the highest status and seen as a person of honour, regarded near to a king and priest and spiritually seen as near to Abraham) is now in a far distance to Abraham in Hades. It seems as if there was no possibility to change his position. In contrast to the rich man, the poor Lazarus who on earth had the status of one of the lowest of society, who was seen as impure and sinful and who was definitely not a person of honour nor a child of Abraham, is now in Abraham’s bosom. The parable is a complete reversal of the ideas people had about the afterlife. It reinforces the law that God is on the side of the poor. It strengthens the point that God has God’s own reasons for justifying people which are not in line with human measures. The “strong belief that piousness was normally rewarded with wealth”¹⁴³ is completely reversed in Luk 16.

II. 1. f. History of religion

Similar material describing different fates such this of the rich man and Lazarus, their different deaths, the geography of the reign of Death and the possibility of a dialogue between

¹³⁸ Ibid. 200.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 199.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. Gen 23:13-16 where Abraham purchases a burial cave for Sarah; Gen 25:7-11 (Abraham is buried himself) and Gen 13:2 where he is described as rich man.

¹⁴¹ Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 199, footnote 195.

¹⁴² Herzog II, Parables, 129.

¹⁴³ Hamel, Poverty and Charity, 200.

the living and the dead had been found in Egypt, Greece and Israel.¹⁴⁴ Especially the first part of the parable (19-26) has many parallels in the Ancient world comparing e.g. a rich merchant and a poor teacher or a rich haughty woman and her servile husband with each other in their situation after their death.¹⁴⁵

We can find striking similarities to an Egyptian folktale, copied in Demotic language on the reverse side of a Greek document in the second half of the first century B.C. It is part of a group of narrations from the 4th century B.C. and these narrations can date back to the 6th century B.C.¹⁴⁶ This folktale tells about retribution in the afterlife as a consequence of the earthly life. The story is about a father, named Satmi, and his son Senosiris. Both attend the honourable funeral of a rich man and the miserable funeral of a poor man. Afterwards, the son takes his father on a tour through the Amendit, the Egyptian Hades, in order to show him what happened to both, the rich and the poor. They find the turn of their fates as a consequence of the divine measure of their earthly deeds. The rich man was seen in torment with the hinge of the door of the Amendit in his right eye socket while the poor man was near to the ruler of the Amendit, Osiris, robed in the rich man's fine linen.¹⁴⁷ Senosiris' words to his father are: "May it be done to you in Amendit as it is done in Amendit to this pauper and not as it is done to this rich man in Amendit."¹⁴⁸

By looking at the Greek orators, we see that for them it was part of the good form of society to compare people with each other in order to be able to praise or rebuke them. In their "orations" as well as in their comedies, the characters of the rich and poor people were very common.¹⁴⁹ We can find similar descriptions with the tendency to moralize the fate of the good and bad characters. The turn of the fates belong to the rhetorical style of these stories. One of these stories is from the author and philosopher Lukian of Samosata who wrote the treatise "Gallus" in which he confronts a poor man named Micyllus with a rich man, named Eukrates. In "Cataplus", another treatise, he confronts the same Micyllus with the tyrant Megapenthes. Micyllus, the poor man, is not a beggar but Megapenthes' neighbour who wants to have some food from the rich man's table. In Hades, after their death, their fates turn: the judgment over the poor Micyllus is easily done but the rich Megapenthes tries to negotiate with the ferryman. This part of the story reminds the audience in a special way of the second part of the Lucan parable (27-31). Finally, the rich Megapenthes is not allowed to

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 113.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Craddock, Interpretation, 195.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 114.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 114; Fitzmyer, Luke, 1126.

¹⁴⁸ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1126.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 115.

drink from the “Water of Forgetting” while the poor Micyllus is allowed to come to the “Island of the Blessed”.¹⁵⁰

We can also find some Jewish tales about retribution in the afterlife. They are found in two forms in the Palestinian Talmud, telling the story of a poor Torah scholar and a rich toll-collector who receive the retribution for their lives on earth in the afterlife.¹⁵¹

Taking into consideration that this story was well known in its main features, it is likely possible that the story was also known at Jesus’ time in Palestine.¹⁵² But there are some elements in the first part of the story, which are only known to the parable in Luk 16, such as the dogs, Abraham’s bosom or the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man. “If the Lucan parable echoes such folktales, it has refashioned them, and there is no reason to think that this refashioning was not done by Jesus himself”¹⁵³. Rudolf Bultmann, on the contrary, is convinced that the story does not come from an Egyptian but a Jewish background. He advocates the thesis that the Early Christians put this story into Jesus’ mouth by adapting it into a Christian perspective.¹⁵⁴

In summary, we see that while the Egyptian folktale puts the emphasis on the poetic justice after death and the Jewish tales stress the aspect of retribution in the afterlife, the narrative parable in Luk 16:19-31 has its emphasis on the right use of money for the rich man, his repentance and the call for a life according to Scripture for his five brothers on earth. Central to the parable in Luke is that the fates change not because the characters are rich or poor but because the rich man does not use his money correctly. This aspect is not known in other tales.¹⁵⁵ The parable’s rejection of a messenger coming from the dead in order to warn the living, which is a central dynamic in other tales,¹⁵⁶ also shows its own dynamics. Besides the aspect of repentance, the fact that the fortunes are reversed (although the Pharisees were deeply convinced that they lived actually according to Moses and the prophets and thus the fortunes were not supposed to be reversed), is new in the story. The fact that Jesus takes the narrative pattern of a probably well-known story underlines this thrust of the parable. By taking a familiar pattern but changing the content and end of it, he leads the audiences’ attention to a certain point, the new aspect of the story.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Cf. Y. Sanh. 6.23c and Y. Hag. 2.77d (cf. Fitzmyer, Luke, 1126).

¹⁵² Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 109.

¹⁵³ Fitzmyer, Luke, 1127.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Bovon, Lukas, 110.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Nolland, Luke, 826.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

II. 2. Homiletical reflection

In this homiletical reflection, I want to reflect about how people in the 21st century might react on Luk 16:19-31. I will look at the audiences' possible reactions and questions to the text. What are contemporary movements and moods about topics like equality and an ethical behaviour in the light of the gospel? This reflection aims to connect the audiences' world with the text's world so that they are able to refer the text's meaning on their own context. This reflection will be very general because I do not have a specific congregation in mind to which I could apply it. But I will put these considerations in the broader South African and German context.

There may be many different responses from a contemporary audience to a sermon on Luk 16:19-31. Different reactions are possible: on the one hand, the audience might identify with the poor Lazarus and will suffer with him, since his deplorable situation is described impressively and vividly. The description of the rich man might lead the audience to approve of his painful fate in Hades. The audience might feel that the reversal of the two fortunes is distributive justice – since both, the rich and the poor deserved it in view of their earthly life. In this sense, Abraham's reference to the law and the prophets seem to be justified and convincing, especially because the rich man (as Pharisee) was a very religious person who should know the "rules" of life and afterlife. On the other hand, the audience might identify with the rich man who lived his life according to the rules of life: one earns money through hard work and spends it for one's own pleasure. Why should the rich man thus spend money for the poor? And, in addition, why should he be responsible for Lazarus' pain?

The audience might also ask questions concerning the reversal of fates. Is Lazarus comforted because of his poverty or because of his piety? Does the rich man come to Hades because of his wealth? What are the criteria for the chasm in the Hades? Is it the intention of the parable to give some ethical instructions about one's lifestyle, or is its emphasis rather on an accurate description about the afterlife?

The text's dualistic descriptions of poor and rich, earth and Hades, and Lazarus and the rich man might be in accordance with many conceptions of a contemporary audience about how the world and afterlife might look. This dualism can either lead its audience to a moralistic overexertion: anxious to try doing "the right thing" in the world since it is requested by the text and punishment threatens. Or the text will lead the audience to resignation because they might feel incapable to do ever what they are supposed to do. The text might meet the audiences' fear that their lifestyles might be completely wrong according to the text, the fear

that they might never be able to lead a “good” life accepted by God, the fear to fail in life and to be forced to bear the consequences in the afterlife. Behind this fear is the image of God who judges those who fail to do the right thing on earth. This is also the fear of the great, mysterious God, who will judge humankind mercilessly. These thoughts raise the question about a lifestyle which is ethically correct in God’s eyes. How could it look like? Is it enough to look for the weak? Is caring for them a deed for salvation? Are people ever able to do enough for their salvation?

Jesus addressed the parable to the people of his day, trying to open their eyes to their self-righteous lifestyles. In this sense, the parable is not intended to be a description about the afterlife but its focus is instead on the present and is addressed to the living. The parable’s central focus lies on the rich man’s self-righteousness, his failure in discerning his social responsibility and the theological justification of his excluding lifestyle. The rich man stands for the Pharisees at his time who strived to observe the law with accuracy. The Pharisees, claiming to have the proper reading of the law, regarding themselves as being spiritually rich and close to God, seeing themselves being in one line with their father Abraham and thus “righteous”¹⁵⁷ are confronted with a complete disaster. Not only does Jesus reject them (the rich, the pious, the near-to-God) by placing them in Hades and denying any way to bridge the gap to Abraham, but he also exalts the poor and impure sinner Lazarus by placing him in the bosom of Abraham. The text speaks to those who justify themselves in terms of money, ancestors and faithfulness to the law. As wealthy people they regarded their wealth as a result of their faithfulness to the law, and thus they saw others (the poor and sick) as being punished by God. This was the reason why they felt their lifestyles were theologically justified: because God punishes those with sickness and poverty who do not live according to the law, they should not be “against” God and help these people. In this sense the Pharisees looked down at the poor and sick.

Similarly to Jesus’ days, we can also today find a lot of exclusion caused by differences of any type between people. We do not have a just and equal world in which everyone has the same rights. We live in a world where social differences between people are often taken as justification for exclusion. The audience of a sermon on Luk 16:19-31 might be familiar with a similar kind of exclusion, and might even be part of it. The text speaks to those who justify themselves in terms of their own created values. These values are like rules which are applied to everyone and to which everyone should live accordingly. Those who live according to these values are “right” and the others are “wrong”. In this way, people might lead lifestyles

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Gen 15:6.

which exclude others with regard to gender, poverty and wealth, races, religions or nationalities. People do very often judge and look down at others, thus taking themselves as the standard. Thus, judgment and separation are a daily matter in our societies today. The reasons for this might be different and general answers can hardly be given. But often fear of the other is reason for exclusion. People are afraid of having a social responsibility for the other. Thus they are at pains to keep a distance between themselves and the other and justify the stranger's behaviour.

David Bosch writes about such kind of exclusion in a South African context. He mentions the differences in the country between whites and blacks in terms of white domination and black oppression, violent conflicts, fear and bitterness. We “are always ready to attack the other at the slightest excuse, to ‘unmask’ him or her and prove ourselves correct.”¹⁵⁸ The reason for these differences have deep roots: “We are again and again made blind and deaf to the possibility of the existence of elements of common humanity in the other.”¹⁵⁹ In having a look at South Africa's past of apartheid where people were separated systematically in terms of race, colour and language, the parable in Luk 16 has enormous actuality. Lazarus, the poor and sick man, lies at the gate of the rich man and is not allowed to enter the house or into the yard for theological reasons: he is “impure” and “punished” by God for his sins. The same kind of exclusion took part in South Africa's past where coloured and black people were restricted on certain areas, not being allowed to go wherever they would like to go. Also this exclusion has been justified theologically: people are created “differently” by God and therefore the differences between races should be maintained in society.

We can also find another kind of exclusion in the South African context in view of HIV/AIDS. People infected with HIV often experience exclusion from their community, their congregation and the society. Many people are afraid of talking to HIV-infected people and being in contact with them. This disease is in some sections of the population regarded as God's punishment for people's sin.

Just as the apartheid-system and HIV/AIDS has been (and is partly still) theologically justified, we can also find theological justification of separation and discrimination in Nazi-Germany. This shows us that misinterpretation of Scripture has been an important instrument in establishing systems of exclusion in different societies. The theological justification of withdrawing from one's social responsibility and for establishing a system of power and oppression is not found only in Luk 16, but also in recent history. The audience of a sermon

¹⁵⁸ Bosch, Good News, 86.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

on Luk 16 (in a South African or German context) might therefore be well aware of where such discrimination might be heading.

But this is exactly what the parable does not intend. It is a call for the end of such inequalities. It is a call for the end of mutual judgment in terms of belief and non-belief, health and sickness, wealth and poverty and other criteria of differences. Judgement should not be up to humans but only to God. Thus a sermon on Luk 16 is not supposed to be a judging and moralizing sermon. Its aim should be to make people aware of the inequalities in their world and that these are not actually intended by Jesus. In this sense, the parable is to be understood as a call for a life which, according to Scripture, makes God's preferential option for the poor and the excluded visible.

A life with equal structures, without discrimination and exclusion is possible in our world, even though there is still a long way to go in order to achieve it. People – in our congregations and in our churches – are dreaming of a just and equal world when they pray with the words of the “Our Father”: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven”. People are longing for the end of inequalities which they are exposed to in their daily lives because it catches them in their differences without being aware of the humanity of others. In this sense the sermon is a call for “good” ethical behaviour towards our neighbours and for raising one's awareness of one's social responsibility. The fact that people are not able to exist on their own but depend on each other in many respects will be well-known to the audience. Despite the growing individualism which sees people as individual subjects, people today are still aware of the fact that one cannot exist without the other. This dependence on the other can be understood in smaller circles like family or friends, but in a broader circle it refers also to the oneness of the church, the whole society and eventually the world.

Finally, it is important to understand that this “good” behaviour is not to be understood as justification by works in order to achieve final salvation but it means to live in the light of Scripture and it is the result of God's care for the world. A sermon on Luk 16 will have to find the balance between the call for an ethical lifestyle and words of comfort about the loving God who accepts us through our faith.

II. 3. Systematic reflection

In this chapter I want to reflect systematically about the topic of an ethical lifestyle. Since the text's main theme is the great distance between the rich man and Lazarus (in their earthly lives as well as in Hades) and its reference to the law and the prophets, I will reflect on how

leading an ethical life which aims to reduce the inequalities on earth is theologically (biblically and systematically) founded. I will therefore also have a closer look at David Bosch and his understanding of the concept of grace.¹⁶⁰

We see in Luk 16:19-31 that Luke does not intend to give a “real” description about “true conditions” in the afterlife but he wants to address the people already in this life. The question is how the implications of Scripture are to be understood in the earthly life. In this sense the text aims to talk about life and not about death.

With the parable in Luk 16:19-31, Luke emphasizes strongly that God is on the side of the poor and of the excluded. The parable is a call for justice, for people’s engagement for the poor that will, eventually, establish equality – both on earth and in heaven. On earth, the rich and the poor men are not equal in terms of material goods, in terms of health and faith, and the gap between them becomes even wider in Hades. But we see in Abraham’s words, calling the rich man and his five brothers for repentance in order to create equality on earth, that this gap is intended neither on earth nor in the afterlife. The parable expresses the dream of a balance¹⁶¹ between people already in life so that, if equality was already established on earth, the imbalance in the afterlife would come to an end. In this sense, the parable is a call for an end of itself and for the establishment of equality. The parable reminds us that our earthly lives are still full of inequalities. But there are not meant to be chasms between people, either on earth or in the afterlife. A balance between poor and rich and the equal distribution of goods should already take place on earth.¹⁶²

The idea of God’s preferential option for the poor entails that God does not look at humans according to human criteria. God judges us according to God’s love for us which does not end where humans judge others as “sinners” or view them as being “punished” by God. God sees into the hearts of people¹⁶³ and justifies them by their faith, not by their deeds. This entails that “correct” ethical behaviour is not the way to salvation if people do not have faith in God. It is not possible to justify oneself by works because faith alone (“sola fide”) is the decisive criteria. In this sense we can – through and in our faith – engage ourselves in working towards a just and equal world without being concerned about our salvation. This is God’s concern and we are not able to gain salvation through deeds.

¹⁶⁰ For further interest, cf. his book: “Good News for the Poor ... and the Rich. Perspectives from the Gospel of Luke”.

¹⁶¹ Dirschauer/Gröpler call this: “Traum der Menschen nach ausgleichender Gerechtigkeit” (Dirschauer/Gröpler, Gottesdienstpraxis, 16).

¹⁶² Cf. Janowski, Hans Norbert, Predigtstudien für das Kirchenjahr 1979. Perikopenreihe I – zweiter Halbband. Krusche, Peter, Rössler, Dietrich, Roessler, Roman (Editors). Stuttgart, Berlin: 1979, 104-108, 106.

¹⁶³ Cf. Luk 16:15: “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

Bosch underlines that God's acceptance and forgiveness which we have by grace does not mean that it is cheap grace: "Jesus' offer of unconditional acceptance and unrestricted pardon does not suggest that redemption is so easily and cheaply obtainable that even the most abhorrent sinner can without further ado obtain forgiveness and salvation. The acceptance of forgiveness only becomes a reality if it goes together with a new life. However, forgiveness remains an expression of undeserved grace: people's offences are so great that they can only be saved through grace, and in no other way."¹⁶⁴ In this sense, because God's grace and love for us is unimaginable and because we are accepted by God despite being sinners, we can engage ourselves with others, and we can lead a life which aims for equality. This encourages us today to live a life in accordance with God's will and in search for equal structures on earth. God's grace and care for us entails social consequences¹⁶⁵ from our part. This is the reason why Luke stresses the aspect of repentance so much in his gospel: for him it is obvious that God's grace and forgiveness for us has practical consequences. People who were forgiven could not simply carry on as before. It must be visible in our relationship towards the other.¹⁶⁶

The parable in Luk 16 stresses that the rich man could have known how to use his money correctly but instead he justified his lifestyle theologically and excluded Lazarus from his life. In this way, the rich man judged Lazarus as a sinner and impure man according to his outer appearance. This is exactly what the parable calls us not to do: we as humans are not supposed to judge others like the Pharisees did since the judgment is finally up to God. We can leave the judgment to God, trusting that God is well-disposed towards us. This is God's unconditional love for us which forgives us our sins and thus makes us free from excluding and judging others. This means that we are not able to judge if someone has reached the status of salvation or not. It is only up to God to see in our hearts and to see our faith. God's preferential option for the poor does not mean that the rich are excluded.¹⁶⁷ In this sense, we are not able to judge that rich people who do not care about the weak are "lost" because we are not judge over them and their faith.

Since the days of Abraham the Jews saw themselves as "children of Abraham" and being part of the covenant between God and God's people. In this way, the rich man also addresses Abraham as "father", thus stressing his kinship with him and emphasizing his "right" behaviour according to which he was supposed to be in "heaven" after his death. Abraham does not deny his kinship but refers to the law and the prophets which have not been respected

¹⁶⁴ Bosch, *Good News*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.* 27.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 24.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 44.

by the rich man. His kinship with Abraham does not justify his behavior¹⁶⁸ or his misinterpretation of Scripture. Later on the Christians joined this covenant through Jesus Christ. In Christ God showed us his immense love. Thus, the relationship between God and God's people can be defined through the covenant. Through our faith in God we are just before God, as people of faith who see and believe that we are part of the covenant with Abraham not because of our deeds, our Torah-learning, and our wealth, but because of God's mercy. God made Abraham a father of nations¹⁶⁹ although Abraham failed many times before God.¹⁷⁰ Not because of Israel's greatness but because of God's grace God made Israel God's own people. Thus, we do not need, as the Pharisees thought, to "prove" that we are the most pious, pure and rich and therefore just before God. Because God comes to us and established the covenant in Christ, we are invited to be part of the covenant and to live a life according to it. Therefore, we are in the "church of Jesus Christ"¹⁷¹ no longer stranger and outsiders but brothers and sisters. Bosch expresses this as follows: "If God turns his back to no-one, who are we to do so? If God in Christ accepts us unconditionally, who are we to set conditions for faith community?"¹⁷² In seeing the relationship between God and God's people through the lenses of the covenant, we realize that we all belong together through our faith in Jesus Christ to the same covenant. Thus, not only the relationship to God becomes important, but also the relationship to our neighbour¹⁷³. In this way, we do have a "social responsibility"¹⁷⁴ for our neighbours at our gates and are called to engage for the end of inequalities in our world. In the community of Christ there is room for all, irrespective of race, gender, nationality, language or culture because "Jesus believed that their case had long been in order with God"¹⁷⁵.

In the gospel of Luke, the poor are not only the poor but represent the broader category of the weak and the excluded.¹⁷⁶ It is "God's preferential option for the poor"¹⁷⁷ that God is on the side of the poor and the excluded. God's nature as being the God of the weak can also be seen in Jesus' death on the cross when he was completely weak and subject to other powers. God himself became poor and weak at the cross. In this sense we are rather called to weakness than to strength. In this weakness we are dependent on the Holy Spirit¹⁷⁸ and will thus have strength (cf. 2Cor 12). In serving the other and in our concern for equality we

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Luk 3:7-9.

¹⁶⁹ E.g. Gen 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:2; 17:16; 17:20.

¹⁷⁰ E.g. Gen 12:10ff.

¹⁷¹ Bosch, Good News, 73.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Cf. ibid. 43.

¹⁷⁴ Nolland, Luke, 826.

¹⁷⁵ Bosch, Good News, 73.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. ibid. 32.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 33.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. ibid. 57.

should not be proud of our actions or see it as self evident, but “our ministry will rather fall on the element of unlimited compassion”¹⁷⁹. We do not follow Jesus because “of what [we] will get out of it [but because] simply [we] cannot do otherwise”¹⁸⁰. Bosch underlines that charity or “social giving of alms is not something which undermines righteousness or structural changes [but] it is one of the expressions of righteousness and serves its purpose.”¹⁸¹ Thus, in serving the other we should not be afraid of “loosing our face” but should rather consider that charity and righteousness in the Hebrew Bible are often used as synonyms.¹⁸²

In this sense, we are called to discern God’s will for a life according to Scripture. This cannot be lived as a kind of unmovable principle but is shaped by God’s Spirit. It has to remain dynamic in our own context and it has to be in harmony with Jesus’ ministry “even though it differs strikingly on the formal level”¹⁸³. Bosch interprets the gospel of Luke in the South African context, underlining that Luke’s challenges have to be translated into the present time in which the realities of our world should be taken into consideration. Bosch is aware of the differences between Jesus’ time and our days: “Today we live in a far more complicated world, where a thorough social and economic analysis of the appearance of wealth and poverty is a pressing necessity. But we also live – in particular in a land like South Africa – in a society where Christians have the ability and influence to do something about unjust economic and social structures and to help find long term solutions.”¹⁸⁴ Bosch concretizes his thoughts in stressing the concept of witnessing about God’s love and care for the weak in our lives by witnessing against any form of economic injustice and exploitation in society.¹⁸⁵ He adds that we are called to exercise a ministry which “will make people relax, help them to accept and behave honestly towards their fellow man, and to change their fear and hate to trust and love.”¹⁸⁶ In remaining in God’s spirit of love and care for the suffering, we need to re-interpret the new circumstances.¹⁸⁷

In all our action, we have to keep in mind that we might try our best in our search for the establishment of equality on earth but “true and heavenly” equality might be only encountered in the eschaton – in God’s new creation of heaven and earth.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 55.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 56.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸² Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁸³ Ibid. 57.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 45.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.* 46.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 58.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 57.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Rev 21:1-5.

II. 4. Draft of a sermon on Luk 16:19-31

Introduction: The vivid description of the parable with its dialogues suggests reading it aloud at the beginning of the sermon with different speakers (narrator, Abraham, rich man). Thus the congregation will not only be able to visualize the different scenes of the parable but also to remember its different parts throughout the sermon.

The last judgment: The sermon will start with possible fears of the congregation. Is this text a moralistic advice how to lead one's life? Does the reversal of fates only takes place because of wealth and poverty of the men? The text might raise the feelings of overexertion (trying to do the "right" thing) or of resignation (one might never be able to do enough). The sermon can clarify some of these questions by means of some historical approaches.

The text talks to the living: By confronting people with some difficult approaches to the text, the preacher can point out that the text is – in its genre as a narrative parable – not an exact portrayal of the world after the earthly life but it is aimed to give a concretisation of Jesus' words in Luk 16:14-18 – thus talking to the living in their earthly life, not to the dead.

The Pharisees and the poor: Who are the people living at Jesus' time? This paragraph will give some historical explanations about the Jewish society in terms of wealth and poverty. The preacher will explain the Pharisees' situation after the war, and will explain their understanding of wealth and poverty as well as their understanding of Scripture. The preacher can refer to Luk 16:14-18, the previous verses of the parable, thus illuminating the Pharisees' attitude towards the interpretation of Scripture.

Misinterpretation of Scripture in our time: At this point, the preacher can give some examples of how the misinterpretation of Scripture can lead to a theologically justified understanding of discrimination and exclusion with the examples from Nazi-Germany and South Africa during apartheid and in its present time of being confronted with HIV/AIDS.

Self-justification: The sermon will elaborate the ways in which we often justify ourselves e.g. when we justify what we do and who we are with money, our knowledge, values, as measures. We create our own criteria with which we justify ourselves.

Focus on another interpretation of Scripture: The sermon will refer to another interpretation of Scripture which shows God's preferential option for the poor. Thus, God does not exclude or punish but sides with the weak and the suffering. This can also be seen in his suffering at the cross. In this sense, God can be seen in the weak and afflicted and this is also a call for us to engage with the excluded and those who are discriminated against.

Why can we engage for the excluded? The sermon can elaborate on the concept of the covenant between God and God's people since Abraham and then through Jesus Christ.

Through God's immense love for us we are invited in this covenant and are thus able to act according to God's will and as members of the covenant. The preacher will reflect on the two sides of the covenant: the relationship with God and the relationship with one's neighbour.

Free from judgment: Because through our faith in God we are included in the covenant, we are free from "proving" that we are "better" than others or justified. The sermon will emphasize that God alone is the judge and because we are in the same covenant with God we are therefore not supposed to judge each other in terms of faith, salvation, health, gender, nationalities or other criteria.

Living according to Scripture: A life led according to Scripture will be exactly what Jesus tries to explain through the parable. This means engaging with and acting for others, for the poor, the excluded, and for the afflicted people. In being accepted by God we can try to establish equal structures on earth, as this is intended in the parable.

Equality: The sermon will continue by drawing some pictures of inequality today (e.g. between gender, race, nationalities, ages etc.), stressing the point that the parable is a call for equality on earth and in the afterlife. The gap between people is not intended either on earth or in Hades.

Establishing equality on earth: The sermon will reflect on people's longing for equal structures on earth. With the assurance that God's acceptance will carry us, we can try to establish in our worlds some equal relationships. Knowing that it can be very difficult to always be a "helper", the preacher will point out that everyone is sometimes the rich man in the parable, sometimes the poor Lazarus. We need to help where it is needed (Lazarus lays near to the rich man at his gate) and we can allow ourselves to accept help when we need it. This should always take place in dynamic ways while being in the Holy Spirit. The sermon will point out that the situation at Jesus' time has to be translated in our time so that we can act accordingly in the same spirit.

Conclusion: The sermon will conclude with a short summary. The parable is not a parable about judgment but it calls us not to judge others because through God's immense covenantal love for us we are already justified by him. This will enable us to live in equal relationships as children of Abraham.

III. Revelation 20:11-15

III. 1. Exegesis

In this exegetical analysis I will translate the text in order to get a deeper insight into grammar, content and language. The text's structure will be mirrored by the translation's layout and the textual criticism will be shown in the footnotes of the translation. In the ensuing textual analysis I will analyse the text's language and content so that the text can speak for itself. Furthermore, I will have a closer look at the context of chapter 20 as well as the context of the whole book of Revelation in order to see how the text is embedded in its context. After that I will reflect on genre and form of the apocalyptic character of the text. The following reflection on the historical context will date the text in its time of its writing as well as the purpose of writing. Afterwards I will have a closer look at the history of some important expressions and motifs in Rev 20:11-15 such as the book of life and the books of deeds and the motif of the throne in order to understand its use in Rev 20:11-15. Finally, in the ensuing reflection on the history of religion, I will work on similar concepts of the last judgment in other religions in order to find out how Rev 20:11-15 differs from other concepts.

III. 1. a. Translation¹⁸⁹

11a Then I saw a great white throne

11b and the One¹⁹⁰ who was sitting¹⁹¹ on it.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ This is my own translation from the Greek Edition according to Nestle Aland, 27th Edition (NA27).

¹⁹⁰ The participle of the verb κάθηναι, used in this sentence, does not express explicitly the masculine character of this being, sitting on the throne. Actually, this participle can be understood to be either masculine or neuter. Most translations use at this place the masculine form "him who was seated on it" (cf. New International Version (1984), English Standard Version (2001), New King James Version (1982), Revidierte Elberfelder (1993), Revidierte Lutherbibel (1984), Roloff, Revelation, 230). I go with Aune and Osborne ("and One seated (upon) it", Aune, David E., Revelation, Vol. 52A-C, Word Biblical Commentary. Metzger, Bruce M., Losie, Lynn Alan, Martin, Ralph P. (General Editors), Nashville: 1998, 1071; Osborne, Grant R., Revelation. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Michigan: 2002, 719) and Malina/Pilch ("the one who sat on it", Malina, Bruce J. and Pilch, John J., Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation. Minneapolis: 2000, 241). Instead of portraying the masculinity of this being in the text which is not explicitly shown in the Greek, I will try to stick to the neuter form, as far as it is possible. Besides, it is probably God who is seen in this story as the judge over the world. The emphasis of God's masculinity would not express that God's being is beyond human sexes.

¹⁹¹ The verb κάθηναι expresses "a seated position" (Danker, Frederick William (Reviser and Editor), A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature. Based on Walter Bauers Griechisch-deutsches Lexikon zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur, 6th Edition, edited by Kurt und Barbara Aland (et altera). Third edition, Chicago and London: 2000, 491).

¹⁹² The phrase "ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον" occurs 26 times in the book of Revelation. The NA27 suggests the reading ἐπ' αὐτόν, thus going with the Minuscule 051 (10th century, first order) and 28 (majority text, Byzantine text form, 5th order), while the alternative reading ἐπ' αὐτοῦ is witnessed by the following witnesses: 8 01

- ^{11c}From its¹⁹³ presence the Earth and the Heaven fled away
^{11d}and no place was found for them.
^{12a}and I saw the dead,
^{12b}the great and the small¹⁹⁴,
^{12c}who have been standing before the throne.
^{12d}And books were opened¹⁹⁵,
^{12e}And another book was opened, which is [the book of] life.
^{12f}And the dead were judged by what has been recorded in the books¹⁹⁶ according to their

(Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), A 02 (Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century, 3rd order), the Minuscles 1006 (11th century, second order in Rev), 1611 (10th century, second order in Rev), 1841 (9th century, second order in Rev), 2053 (13th century, second order in Rev), 2062 (13th century, second order in Rev), 2329 (10th century, second order in Rev), and some few other manuscripts (*pc*). The source 1854 (11th century, second order in Rev) and few other manuscripts (*pc*) witness the reading: ἐπ' αὐτόν. Since this is the only witness, I do not consider this reading to be original. The alternative readings ἐπ' αὐτοῦ are according to the outer criteria not only strong but also many witnesses, where most of them are of the second order. Thus this reading seems to be original. While having a look at the use of ἐπὶ with genitive and accusative, we see that ἐπὶ with both cases is a description of place, while ἐπὶ with accusative is denoting merely a movement toward a place, ἐπὶ with genitive involves the idea of actual or intended arrival (cf. Whittaker, Molly, A New Testament Greek Grammar. An Introduction. Revised 2nd Edition. London: 2nd 1980, 125f; cf. Muller, Theodore H., New Testament Greek. A Case Grammar Approach. Fort Wayne, Indiana: 1978, 63.66). The inner criteria thus lead us to the assumption that the reading ἐπ' αὐτόν, as witnessed by the NA27, might be original because it is, according to the grammar, more difficult to understand and thus have been changed by the text critical apparatus into ἐπ' αὐτοῦ. The rule "lectio difficilior probabilior" can therefore be applied and I stay with the reading of the NA27.

¹⁹³ The Minuscule 051 (10th century, first order) and **℣** (majority text, Byzantine text form, 5th order) omit the definite article τοῦ while the following manuscripts witness it: **ℵ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), A 02 (Codex Alexandrinus, 5th century, 3rd order), P 025 (9th century, second order in Rev), the Minuscles 1006 (11th century, second order in Rev), 1611 (10th century, second order in Rev), 1841 (9th century, second order in Rev), 2050 (of the year 1107 A.D., second order in Rev), 2329 (10th century, second order in Rev), and few other manuscripts (*pc*). According to the outer criteria, most of the (strong) witnesses confirm the reading of the NA27. It seems as if the writers of Minuscule 051 and **℣** had just forgotten the definite article. Although the reading without the article is more difficult, I go with the reading of the NA27 and consider this reading to be original.

¹⁹⁴ The reading "the great and the small" occurs in the book of Revelation in Rev 20:12 and only nine times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 44:12; 1 Sam 20:2; 2 Chr 31:15; 2 Chr 34:30; Esth 1:5.20; Jer 6:16; Jon 3:5; Am 6:11) whereas the reversed phrase "the small and the great" occurs more than 30 times in the Hebrew Bible and four times in the book of Revelation (11:18; 13:16; 19:5.18). We see thus that the reading in 20:12 is an exception in the book of Revelation.

The manuscript **℣**^K (majority text, Koine group, including 046, Byzantine text form, 5th order) and the Minuscule 2030 (12th century, second order in Rev) omit the reading τοὺς μεγάλους καὶ τοὺς μικροὺς. But since all other witnesses do have this reading, as also witnessed in the NA27, I do not estimate the reading of **℣** to be original.

¹⁹⁵ The text NA27 witnesses the reading of the verb ἡνοίχθησαν (indicative aorist passive 3 person plural). Some manuscripts have the alternative reading of the verb ἡνοίξαν (indicative aorist active 3 person plural). This reading expresses the active opening of the books ("and books opened"). It is witnessed by the following manuscripts: 1854 (11th century, second order in Rev), 2030 (12th century, second order in Rev), 2329 (10th century, second order in Rev), **℣**^K (majority text, Koine group, including 046, Byzantine text form, 5th order), the Church Father Ambrose. According to the outer criteria, the witnesses for the alternative reading are not very strong in age and quantity. Thus I go with the reading of the NA27. The same is true for the alternative reading of **ℵ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), which reads ἡνέωχθη (indicative aorist passive 3 person singular). I do not estimate this reading to be original.

¹⁹⁶ The text of the NA27 witnesses the reading τοὺς βιβλίους. The manuscript **ℵ** 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order) has as alternative reading: ταῖς βιβλοῖς. This makes no sense grammatically since τὸ βιβλίον has the neuter sex and thus should be read in dative plural as τοῖς βιβλίους. I consider the reading of **ℵ** 01 to be a spelling mistake where α and ο had been confused in the article and the ι had been forgotten in the second word.

deeds.

^{13a}And the Sea gave up the dead who were in it¹⁹⁷.

^{13b}And the Death and the Hades gave up the dead who were in them¹⁹⁸.

^{13c}And they were judged¹⁹⁹, each according to their²⁰⁰ deeds.

^{14a}And the Death and the Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

^{14b}This death is the second²⁰¹ one, the lake of fire.²⁰²

¹⁵And if someone was not found recorded in the book²⁰³ of life this one was thrown into the lake of fire.

III. 1. b. Textual analysis

III. 1. b. α. Structure

The text Rev 20:11-15 describes two lines, going from motif to motif by referring back to previous motifs. Thus the text is structured into two main parts. The first part (11-12) is the

¹⁹⁷ While the text of NA27 has the reading νεκροὺς τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ, the following manuscripts change the order of the words and read ἐν αὐτῇ νεκροὺς: Minuscles 051 (10th century, first order), 1854 (11th century, second order in Rev) and \mathfrak{M}^A (majority text, Andreas group, including P, Byzantine text form, 5th order). This reading does not seem to be original, since it tries to take out the longwinded reading of the text. This assumption is also supported by the outer criteria since only few manuscripts witness this change of the order of the words.

¹⁹⁸ The same witnesses as in verse 13a and the Minuscule 2030 (12th century, second order in Rev) also change in this sentence the order from νεκροὺς τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς to ἐν αὐτοῖς νεκροὺς. I do not consider this reading to be original. I therefore argue with the same criteria as I did in verse 13a. I go with the text of the NA27.

¹⁹⁹ The Majuscule \aleph 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order) does not write ἐκρίθησαν but κατεκρίθησαν, thus probably intending to reinforce this verb. Since this is the only witness for this reading and also probably changing the text for theological reasons, I do not estimate this reading to be original.

²⁰⁰ An alternative reading (αὐτοῦ) to the text of NA27 (αὐτῶν) is witnessed by \mathfrak{M}^K (majority text, Koine group, including 046, Byzantine text form, 5th order) and two or more Sahidic manuscripts. According to the outer criteria, these witnesses are not many and strong witnesses. According to the inner criteria we can assume that this might be a spelling mistake from the pronoun personal genitive masculine plural to the pronoun personal genitive masculine singular. Therefore I estimate the text of the NA27 to be original.

²⁰¹ Instead of the reading of the NA27 (θάνατος ὁ δεύτερός), \aleph 01 (Codex Sinaiticus, 4th century, first order), the Minuscule 1611 and few other manuscripts (pc) have the reading δεύτερός θάνατος. Since these are not many witnesses and it seems also to correct the reading, I do not consider this reading to be original.

²⁰² This verse (οὗτος ὁ θάνατος ὁ δεύτερός ἐστιν ἡ λίμνη τοῦ πυρός) is omitted by the following manuscripts: 051 (10th century, first order), 2053^{txt} (13th century, second order in Rev, running biblical text of a commentary of a Church Father), 2062^{txt} (13th century, second order in Rev, running biblical text of a commentary of a Church Father), \mathfrak{M}^A (majority text, Andreas group, including P, Byzantine text form, 5th order), the Armenian tradition, the Bohairic tradition and Augustine. According to the “lectio brevior probabilior”, this could be a later addition. But, on the other hand, these texts are only few – in comparison to the others, witnessing the reading of the NA27. In addition, since the end of verse 14a ends in the same way than this omitted sentence (λίμνη τοῦ πυρός), the writers could have skipped this sentence. For that reason, I argue that this omitted sentence is a haplography. I therefore consider the text of the NA27 to be original.

²⁰³ The NA27 has the reading τῇ βίβλῳ while the some witnesses write τῷ βίβλιω, thus keeping the correct grammatical form since τὸ βιβλίον is neuter. These are the following witnesses: Minuscule 1006 (11th century, second order in Rev), 1841 (9th century, second order in Rev), 2030 (12th century, second order in Rev), 2377 (14th century, second order in Rev) and \mathfrak{M}^K (majority text, Koine group, including 046, Byzantine text form, 5th order). Since these are only a few witnesses who probably corrected the incorrect grammatical form they found in their text, I do not consider this reading to be original and go with the text of the NA27.

description of the judgment and the process of judgment. The second part (13-15) describes other figures like Sea, Death and Hades and their fate.

The first line starts with the motif of the throne (11a), describing it and “the one who was seated on it” (11b). This description is the introductory description for the scene of the judgment, thus giving a reference to the active being in the judgment. This part gives also insight into the power and kind of charisma of the being on the throne since even Heaven and Earth have to flee from its presence. The line then continues to the motifs of the dead (12a) and the books (12d-f). It explains the situation of the dead who are standing before the throne, and who are judged according to their deeds. Verses 12d-f mentions these books as well as the “book of life” which are important for the judgment. From here on, the process of judgment starts.

The second line concentrates on figures like Sea (13a), Death and Hades (13b). These figures are introduced in verse 13 as active subjects who can “give up” the dead. The line continues then with the dead (13a, 13b) and their judgment (13c), but this time the description of the judgment does not refer to the books or the book of life. From here on, the line continues to the lake of fire in which Death and Hades (14a) are thrown. This is the description of the end of Death and Hades (14). The last verse stays in the line of the description of the end, which is this time the end for the dead. This line concludes with the reference to the book of life (12e).

The text contains 15 verbs from which 7 of them are in the passive mode. This shows the passivity of the persons being judged and it reflects also the activity of the actor – probably the judge on the throne. This being searches for a place for Earth and Heaven (11b), opens the books (12d) and the book of life (12e), it judges the dead (12f and 13c) by reading the books (12f and 15), and it throws Death, Hades (14a) and the dead who are not written in the book of life (15b) into the lake of fire. Perhaps it is also this being who writes those books and the book of life.

III. 1. b. β. Verse by verse

The first person narrator depicts the big, white throne in verse 11a. The throne is a very important motif in this scene since the whole scene does take place before the throne and thus shapes the scene’s character.²⁰⁴ In only one sentence the author describes in verse 11b the being, “the One” on the throne. It is striking that this being on the throne is not described

²⁰⁴ For this reason, I will have a closer look at this motif in the chapter “The motif of the throne”, p. 60.

more carefully, but, according to Aune, the readers are well aware that the participial phrase “the One who sits on the throne” is a repeated designation of God in Revelation.²⁰⁵ Osborne points out that John is not interested in differentiating between God and Christ as judge on the throne, rather he intends for both father and son to be involved in the judgment.²⁰⁶ Another reason why the being on the throne is not described more accurately might be that it seems to be too “holy” and too mysterious to be described like an object. This description avoids the direct mention of the divine name.

The place where this throne stands and where the judgment takes place is apparently neither on Earth nor in Heaven, since, as it is mentioned in 11c, Earth and Heaven flee from this place. The idiom “to flee from the presence of someone” is a frequent expression in the Hebrew Bible.²⁰⁷ Looking in God’s face is regarded as a very great danger, since God’s holiness would destroy this person looking into God’s face.²⁰⁸ This is the reason why the creation has to flee from God’s presence. The fact that Earth and Heaven are mentioned together expresses that the totality of the creation²⁰⁹ flees from the great white throne. According to Aune, this verse is metaphorical and describes the reaction of nature to the theophany.²¹⁰ This form of theophany has two basic elements which are also known to the readers of the Hebrew Bible²¹¹ and of early Jewish literature²¹²: the coming of the deity and the reaction of nature.

For an ancient person, “the earth”, as opposed to the sea and the sky, meant the dry land, the fields, valleys and mountains. “To say that the earth fled away, therefore, would presumably be to say that all the familiar features of the land rushed away”²¹³. This encounter between creation and creator had not been seen as a cosmic vacuum but rather as a return of the earth to “its *primaeval* [sic!] state of (uninhabitable) chaos”²¹⁴. Mealy also talks about “a complete loss of form [so] that they were no longer there to be perceived as such”²¹⁵. The author anticipates the destruction of Earth and Heaven, as it is also mentioned in Rev 21:1. Before a

²⁰⁵ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 1100f. This phrase occurs in Rev 4.1.3.9; 5:1.7.13; 6:16; 7:10.15; 19:4; 21.5.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Osborne, Revelation, 720.

²⁰⁷ Cf. e.g. Ex 14:25; Josh 10:11; Jdg 9:40; 2 Sam 10:13f; 2 Ki 3:24; 1 Chr 10:1; 1 Macc 5:34; Jdt 14:3.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Lohse, Art. “πρόσωπον”, in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1959, Vol. VI, 773f.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Danker, Lexicon of the New Testament, 737.

²¹⁰ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 1101.

²¹¹ Cf. Ex 3:6 and 33:20; Pss 18:7-15; 68:7f; Am 1:2; Mic1:3f; Hab 3:4-15.

²¹² Cf. Sir 16:18f; 43:16f; Jdt 16:15; T.Mos.10:3-6; 1QH 3:32-36; T. Levi 3:9; Sib. Or 3.669-81 (cf. Aune, Revelation, 1101).

²¹³ Mealy, J. Webb, After the Thousand Years. Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20. Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 70. Sheffield: 1992, 161. This image (cf. also Rev 16:20) is also been given by the Hebrew Bible, e.g. Jer 4:23-26; Ps 97:1-5.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 162.

new age can begin, the old age must cease.²¹⁶ The mention of the non-existence of a place for Earth and Heaven (11d) leaves the audience with the question why Earth and Heaven do not have another place to stay or, to be more precise, why no place has been found for them.

Verse 11c.d portrays Heaven and Earth like real persons. The active form of the verb φεύγω is used in reference to them. Thus the narrator uses the stylistic device of a personification which humanizes Heaven and Earth. In Dan 2:35 (Theodotion) and Zech 10:10 we find similar phrases and thus the Semitic character of this phrase becomes clear.²¹⁷

Verse 12 starts with the same words as verse 11a (“and I saw”), thus expressing a second beginning, the beginning of the plot. This verse does not mention where all the dead come from, apparently the author presupposes the resurrection of the dead, as it is also mentioned in 20:5. The living are not mentioned. The dead are standing before the throne, as if they were already waiting for the judgment.

The narrator wants to emphasize in verse 12b that all dead are to be judged. Thus he specifies it with the sentence “the great and the small”. This does not only refer to their physical size but also to other (earthly) classifications.²¹⁸ This phrase is an idiom which expresses both in Semitic and Greek literature the “totality of people of all ages or all stations in life”.²¹⁹

The fact that the dead stand before the throne (12c) while the being itself is sitting on the throne, emphasizes the difference in terms of authority and power between them. It describes the one sitting on the throne as the highest in the hierarchy and it also describes the respect of the dead for God’s authority.

Apparently, the books (12d) and the “book of life” (12e) are not the same. The readers do not know what is written in the books or in the book of life. The verb ἀνοίγω in this sentence is used twice in the passive form, thus referring to a subject who opens the books, probably angels or God.²²⁰ This verse is a probable allusion to the judgment scene in Dan 7:10 where “books were opened”. It is not clear in the text why these books are opened. Are they opened in order to show the deeds the dead committed in their lives or in order to change the book of life according to what was written in the books of deeds?²²¹ The plural of the verb ἀνοίγω

²¹⁶ This image appears also in Isa 13:10.13; 34:4; 51:6; Ps 102:26; Ezek 32:7-8; Joel 2:10.

²¹⁷ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 1101, cf. Osborne, Revelation, 721.

²¹⁸ Aune translates the phrase “τοὺς μεγάλους καὶ τοὺς μικροὺς” with: “the important and the unimportant”, thus giving the translation his own interpretation (Aune, Revelation, 11071f. Cf. also Botha, Eugene, Reading Revelation. Botha, Eugene, de Villiers, Pieter G R, Engelbrecht, Johan (Editors). Pretoria: 1988, 143).

²¹⁹ Aune, Revelation, 766.

²²⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 1102.

²²¹ Mealy is of the opinion that the books of deeds in Rev 20:12 are not opened in order to make revisions in the book of life but rather “to put on public display the concrete and indisputable evidence ratifying the inclusion or exclusion of names from the book of life” (Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 171).

“probably reflects the early Jewish tradition of *two* heavenly books, one for recording the deeds of the righteous and the other for recording the deeds of the wicked.”²²²

Verse 12f refers to the judgment which the dead have to undergo. We see that the dead are not at all active in this paragraph which is also seen in the use of the passive verb κρίνω. This verse does not explain who the judge is, but the presumption is near that “the One on the throne” is the judge. The audience learn that the dead are judged according to what is written in the books – apparently these books contain a record of a person’s behaviour or maybe also the judgment itself. These books probably do not include the book of life, mentioned in verse 12e.²²³ This verse also does not mention what this judgment looks like and what the dead experience.

Verses 13a.b introduce new subjects to the audience, thus transferring the audiences’ attention from the judgment to these new actors. With the mention of the resurrection of the dead coming from Sea, Death and Hades, it seems as if the dead are coming for a second time because they had already been standing before the throne (12c). This suggests the question that verse 13a was meant to be a second beginning of this story. Aune suggests two possibilities for this question: it is possible that verse 13a.b is either a later insertion by the author, or it is “another instance of his [the author’s] use of *hysteron-proteron*, i.e. the arrangement of events in the reverse of their logical order”²²⁴. Death and Hades occur four times together as personified figures in the book of Revelation.²²⁵ They are always mentioned in this order, suggesting that Death is considered the ruler over the realm of Hades.

Verse 13a and 13b are structured in exactly the same way. This figure of expression, presenting a formal characteristic of Hebrew Poetry and also found in Greek literature,²²⁶ is called “parallelismus membrorum”. The dead appear from places which are all situated under the earth. The narrator’s emphasis lies on the fact that *all* dead are coming, those from the land, and those from the sea. Behind these verses we find the idea which was common to ancient coastal societies (Greeks, Romans, and Palestinians), that the dead had two different places to stay, depending on how they died: in the sea or on the land.²²⁷ The abode of the sea

²²² Aune, Revelation, 1102. Cf. for these two heavenly books Ps 56:8; Isa 65:6; Jer 22:30; Mal 3:16; Dan 7:10; Jub 30:22; 36:10; Asc. Isa. 9:22; Lev. Rab. 26; Gen Rab. 81; b. Ta’ an. 11a. For further reflection on these books, see the chapter “The motif of the books”, p. 58.

²²³ Cf. *ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.* Other examples of the use of *hysteron-proteron* in Revelation are 3:3.17; 5:5; 6:4; 10:4.9; 22:14.

²²⁵ Cf. Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13.14. The combination of Death and Hades occurs also in Jewish literature, usually in poetic texts. In Greek and Latin texts, these two figures can also be found as personifications (cf. *ibid.* 401).

²²⁶ Cf. Soulen/Soulen, Handbook, 133.

²²⁷ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 1103.

was invariably thought inappropriate and unnatural, whereas the abode of the land was seen as natural and as the region where the realm of the Hades was thought to be located.²²⁸

Verses 13a.b, while depicting Sea, Death and Hades as active subjects, describe in addition that the dead had been under the power of these subjects. We see that the narrator again uses the stylistic device of personification. This time he personifies Sea, Death and Hades, giving them an active role. This is expressed through the verb ἔδωκεν.

In verse 13c, the dead are again judged. This is described in exactly the same words as in verse 12f, but without the mention of the book of life. It is not quite clear if this second mention is a mere repetition of the first sentence or if it is a second judgment. Osborne explains the description of two judgments in verses 12f and 13c as the event of a twofold judgment: the judgment of the righteous (12) and the judgment of the sinners (13-15). He concludes this from verse 12c (the dead standing before the throne), saying that the saints always stand before the throne in the book of Revelation whereas the sea is a symbol for evil, thus giving up the sinners.²²⁹ Another explanation comes from Mealy who sees the twofold description of the judgment of the dead as two different judgments: the first is the judgment is whether the resurrected dead are worthy of a part in resurrection and the new age of Christ's kingdom. The second judgment, starting with the second resurrection of those who have been unrepentant in the first judgment, occurs after thousand years (cf. 20:7)²³⁰. The dead, standing before the throne, are now judged again according to their deeds done in the state of resurrection after their first death.²³¹

The expression “ἡ λίμνη τοῦ πυρός” occurs in verse 14a for the first time in this paragraph, but refers back to Rev 20:10. It is not mentioned why Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire and what this entails for them – do Death and Hades suffer from the same treatment as mentioned in 20:10?²³² The motif of punishment of the wicked by fire is a frequent motif in early Jewish and Christian literature.²³³ In the Hebrew Bible, the fire has

²²⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 1102.

²²⁹ Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 721f.

²³⁰ According to Mealy, the temporal distance between the two judgments in Rev 20:12 and 20:13f is left unexpressed because they are two movements of a single overall judgment (cf. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 184).

²³¹ Cf. *ibid.* 180f. According to Mealy, these dead who have “proved themselves unworthy of the gift of resurrection at the parousia will prove themselves equally unworthy of it, even when they are granted it a thousand years later. The implicit picture is of a second chance, *offered* out of divine justice, grace and mercy, but *not accepted*.” (*ibid.* 186). Mealy's argumentation is in my opinion too constructed since the text itself does not give any allusion that *all* dead, coming from Sea, Death and Hades, are thrown into the lake of fire. The text leaves it open.

²³² “And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” (Rev 20:10).

²³³ Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1103.

always been seen as a sign for God's anger.²³⁴ God could judge with fire in the course of history (e.g. Gen 19:24), but the fire also occurs together with the mention of the last judgment in the Hebrew Bible.²³⁵ The term "λίμνη τοῦ πυρός" had likely been shaped by the idea of the Dead Sea as place of punishment for the evil spirits and the punishment of Sodom (Gen 19).²³⁶ We see that the author of Revelation used a very common image in Rev 20:14a for the portrayal of the punishment. Being thrown into the lake of fire is the final judgment and the death of Death.²³⁷ It can also be a symbol for the end of demonic forces.

Since Death and Hades had been portrayed in a parallel way with the Sea but the Sea is not mentioned anymore, the question remains whether the Sea likewise undergoes a fate like Death and Hades, since it is mentioned in 21:1 that "the sea was no more". The text leaves the Sea's fate open.

The second death (ὁ θάνατος), mentioned in verse 14b, does not have the same function as the Death in verse 13b and 14a. This death is portrayed as the object and not as the subject. This second death refers back to Rev 20:6. This questions how Death and Hades could experience a second death when they have not experienced a first, physical death. The death of Death has come. Botha remarks that now there are no obstacles (no evil or death) anymore "that could possibly prevent the coming of God's new world."²³⁸

Verse 15 shows the importance of the book of life. Being written in this book seems to be the only criterion for salvation. Those dead who are not recorded in this book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. With the book of life, the final judgment itself receives another quality since it is dependent on what is written in the book of life. For this reason, Aune estimates this last verse to be a redactional insertion into the final text.²³⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza assumes that those written in the book of life are "the faithful" (referring back to 20:4) who do not have to fear the "second death".²⁴⁰ Chapter 21 gives a list of those who are thrown into the lake of fire (21:8) and those who are written in the book of life (21:27). How salvation will take place is not made clear to the readers, whereas its opposite, the punishment, should be clear for everyone. The passive form of the verb εὐρίσκω again shows an actor in that scene who actively searches to discover if the dead are written in the book of life or not. The

²³⁴ E.g. Jer 4:4; 5:14; 21:12; Ez 21:36; 22:21.31; 38:19; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Na 1:6; Pss 79:5; 89:47.

²³⁵ Cf. Lang, Art. "πῦρ", in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1959, Vol. VI, 934-936. Cf. e.g. Isa 66:24; 34:10; Judth 16:17; Sir 21:9f.

²³⁶ Cf. Lang, Art. "πῦρ", 946.

²³⁷ Maybe the author of Revelation had also 1 Cor 15:26 ("The last enemy to be destroyed is death") and Isa 25:8 ("He will swallow up death forever") in mind.

²³⁸ Botha, Reading Revelation, 143.

²³⁹ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 1103.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, Revelation. Vision of a Just World, Proclamation Commentaries. Krodell, Gerhard (Editor). Minneapolis: 1991, 108.

presumption can be made that this actor might be the being on the throne, mentioned in verse 11a, but this is not explicitly said. In the same way as Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, the dead who are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. Thus they are shown to be on the same level as Death and Hades.

III. 1. b. γ. Summary

This text describes the scenario, “embracing the highest and lowest regions of the cosmos”²⁴¹, as it will take place at the end of history. It is a powerful text with many impressing pictures such as the “One on the throne”, the figures of Earth and Heaven, Sea, Death and Hades. This text draws a picture of the dead, standing before the throne, thus indicating to whom they show their respect, and it draws a picture of the books and the book of life which are opened in order to see what is written in them, and in order to judge the dead according to these books. This text is also very powerful in its depiction of the lake of fire and those who are thrown into it.

This description of the last judgment shows that everyone and everything is judged. The dead are judged according to their deeds, written in the books, and Death and Hades are also judged. Yet the text leaves some questions: It is not said who the dead are. Are they only non-Christians, those who are not “Saints” (20:4)? Are the saints and the sinners judged in different judgments? Are only the good saved and the bad condemned?²⁴² The criterion for salvation seems to be whether one is written in the book of life or not. Yet, what are the criteria for being written in the book of life? Boring points out that such objectifying thinking would make John’s thinking more systematic and linear than he intends.²⁴³ For Boring, the most important picture is that *all* dead stand before the throne.²⁴⁴

And it is not only all the dead but also the whole cosmos which is subject to its judge. This judge is probably God on the great white throne, since the dead stand before the throne. The aim of this text and the depiction of the action is the judgment. In the end of the paragraph, everyone is judged in different ways. Schüssler Fiorenza points out that the destruction of the

²⁴¹ Malina/Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary*, 242.

²⁴² Aune suggests that Death and Hades stand for all the unrighteous dead who are not found written in the book of life and are thus thrown into the lake of fire (cf. Luk 16:22 and 1 Pet 3:19f), (Aune, *Revelation*, 1103).

²⁴³ Cf. Boring, M. Eugene, *Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Revelation, James Luther Mays (Editor), Paul J. Achtemeier (New Testament Editor). Louisville, Kentucky: 1989, 211.

²⁴⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 211. Against Krodell, who is of the opinion that only the dead and not the resurrected saints are subjected to the general judgment (cf. Krodell, Gerhard A., *Revelation. The Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*. Minneapolis: 1989, 339).

evil powers of the world shows God's intention for a world without evil forces, which makes room for God's new creation.²⁴⁵

Looking at the text in terms of lines of opposition, we see one line with the Earth and the Heaven (11b), another line of opposition with Death and the book of life. Another line shows the Sea and the lake of fire, the last one being already an oxymoron in itself since a fire could not survive in a lake. In all these lines of opposition, we see the judge, the one on the throne who is more powerful than all these elements and who judges the dead and the others.

Rev 20:11-15, although it has the theme of the final judgment going throughout the paragraph, does not seem to be coherent. Between verse 12 and 13 there seems to be an inconsistency of style for different reasons. First, verse 13 is an introduction of new subjects: Sea, Death and Hades, thus indicating a new beginning. Second, anticipating that Earth and Heaven are gone in verse 11, how is it still possible that the sea is there (13a)?²⁴⁶ Third, it describes the coming of the dead, although they were already standing before the throne (12c). Fourth, verse 13c tells (in exactly the same words than in verse 12f) the judgment of the dead, even though they had already been judged in verse 12f. Verse 14 introduces a completely new aspect of judgment to the readers with the lake of fire, thus shifting the audiences' attention from the judgment to the lake of fire. Only verse 15 with the mention of the book of life connects the second part of the paragraph with the first part. This indicates the chiasmus in the text's structure: verse 12e mentions the book of life, verse 12f the judgment, verses 13a.b describe the activity of Sea, Death and Hades and again in verse 13c the judgment of the dead is mentioned. It concludes with the book of life in verse 15.

III. 1. c. Contextual analysis

III. 1. c. α. Context of Revelation 20

In the context of chapter 20, the verses 11-15 seem to be well embedded. Rev 20:1 and 4 start in the same way as our paragraph in verses 11a and 12a: καὶ εἶδον. And in verse 4 we find even the same object as in verse 11a: the throne (καὶ εἶδον θρόνους). This expression is used thirty three times in the book of Revelation. In verse 11a it functions as introduction into a new vision narrative whereas in verse 12a it is used to focus on the specific group named there.²⁴⁷ This motif of a person having a vision and describing it is continued in the following

²⁴⁵ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 108.

²⁴⁶ Cf. also Osborne, *Revelation*, 722f.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 338; 1100; 1101.

chapter, Rev 21:1.2, also starting with the same words: καὶ εἶδον. We can see that the motif of Heaven and Earth, described in verses 9 and 11b continues in the first verse of chapter 21. After Heaven and Earth had to flee from the throne (11b and re-mentioned in 21:1b), chapter 21 describes the new world and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth. There are also some other motifs which run throughout chapter 20 such as the throne (4, 11), the judgment (4-6, 12f, 13c), the second death (6, 14) and the motif of someone thrown into the lake of fire (10, 14a.b, 15b).

Nevertheless, the paragraph Rev 20:11-15 has its own topic. After the ending phrase of the previous paragraph “εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων” in verse 10, the paragraph starts with something new: the last judgment of the dead. Mealy argues that the description of the last judgment in Rev 20:11-15 is the description of the same judgment scene as already shown in Rev 20:4-6. Mealy already made the observation in Rev 6:16-17 and 7:15-17 that the judgment focuses either on its salvific or on its condemnatory side. For him, the scenes in Rev 20:4-6 and 11-15 seem to be the same scene, one depicting the salvation of the saints, the other the condemnation of the wicked.²⁴⁸ According Mealy, both scenes of judgment have to be read together. As two versions of the same story they each serve to interpret the significance of the other.

The paragraph 20:11-15 is well embedded in its context in chapter 20: The beginning of chapter 20 describes the period of the thousand years until the end with the judgment (20:1-6). The following paragraph (20:7-10) describes the last struggle after the thousand years. 20:11-15 refer to the time after these thousand years. They are at the same time the conclusion of this chapter.

When looking at the last judgment in Rev 20, it is also very important to look at the beginning of chapter 21. This is the description of the creation of a new heaven and earth and the promise that God “will wipe away every tear from the eyes of humankind” (Rev 21:5). With the placement of the last judgment not at the end of the book of Revelation, but before the new creation, it loses its final character.

III. 1. c. β. Context of the book of Revelation

The book of Revelation is a whole book in the New Testament with a Christian view on the present and the future of the world.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 169.

The most important topic going through the whole book of Revelation is the opening of the seven seals through Christ, the lamb. These seals show the way through history and its meaning. The final events of history start with the opening of these seals. The opening of the last seal shows the final end of history, God's glorification and the resurrection of the dead.

Schüssler Fiorenza parallelizes Rev 19:11-22:9, the description of the liberation from Evil, with the rhetorical situation in the cities of Asia Minor, described in 1:9-3:22. Thus she depicts that in the description of the last judgment the destruction of the evil forces is presented in a reversed order from that of their introduction.²⁴⁹ The description of the destruction of Rome is followed by the punishment of the antichrist (19:11-20) and the punishment of Satan (20:1-10) and the powers of Hades. Finally, after the judgment of all the dead (20:11-15), John describes the coming of God's new creation and the well-being of God's people (21:1-8).

John does not necessarily distinguish between God and Christ in the book of Revelation since for him these "two" figures are one. In the whole context of Revelation, the Lamb is never an independent figure but always "Lamb-as-representative-of God"²⁵⁰. The same is true for God who is never a figure apart from Christ but always "God-who-defines-himself-by-Christ"²⁵¹. In having a look at the description of Jesus Christ in Revelation we see that Christ is seldom called "Son of Man" or "Son of God" as he is often called in the gospels but 23 times he is called "Lord". This name of Christ fits very well to the atmosphere of the book of Revelation: the people to whom the book is addressed are in a physical and spiritual extreme situation in which they hope to get help and support from God. Therefore Christ is described as the powerful Christ.²⁵² Little attention is given to the human side of Jesus as we find it in other books like 'teacher', 'rabbi', 'servant', 'prophet', 'man', except the mention of his death, resurrection and its benefits.²⁵³ Most of the time, Christ is called "Lord," and this name is used interchangeably with God and Christ.²⁵⁴ The audience might think of God as judge and as opener of the books. This picture is reversed in 21:27 where the book of life is mentioned again, called τὸ βιβλίον τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου – the Lamb's book of life.

Chapter 20 is the beginning of God's glorification. It is the beginning of the end of the world, the end of the whole of creation, mentioned in Rev 20:11 with the disappearance of Earth and Heaven. But this is not the end of the book. After the final judgment, chapter 21

²⁴⁹ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 35f., 103.

²⁵⁰ Boring, *Interpretation*, 211.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² For information about the historical background see the chapter "Historical context", p. 55.

²⁵³ Cf. Witherington III, Ben, *Revelation. The New Cambridge Commentary*. Cambridge: 2003, 27.

²⁵⁴ Cf. ibid. This can also be seen in the description of the openings of the books in 20:12d.e.

describes the “creatio ex nihilo”, the creation out of nothing, and God’s descending to the people. John arranged his book like a great composition of art where the final judgment is not the end of the world but followed by the new creation.

As we saw in the context analysis, the book of Revelation is written very consistently. The book from the beginning to the end reflects John’s theological intention. Therefore the assumption that an “underlying document of Jewish-apocalyptic origin that has been supplemented and commented upon by a Christian editor is not viable.”²⁵⁵ According to Roloff, the book originated in two phases: the author probably enlarged the book of visions (probably 4:1-19:11), which was written first, and then enlarged the part with the letters (1:4-3:22) as well as the concluding sections (19:11-22:21).²⁵⁶ Thus, we see the importance of always reading single paragraphs of Revelation in the context of the entire book. They cannot be read alone since their meaning is dependant on the occurrence of similar meanings and their context.

III. 1. d. Genre of Rev 20:11-15

In the whole book of Revelation we find different genres which are almost impossible to distinguish. These are genres like prophetic, apocalyptic and epistolary writings. Most of the scholars see the book of Revelation as some kind of apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy within an epistolary framework²⁵⁷, which reflected in the opening (Rev 1:4) and the end (Rev 22:21) of the book. Its classification as apocalyptic literature is widely accepted since it is concerned with an eschatological perspective about the end of the world and the state of the soul after death. “The apocalyptic frame asserts that this age is under the power of evil and that the wicked therefore prosper and the righteous suffer.”²⁵⁸

The world view of apocalyptic writings has some important differences in comparison to Hellenistic writings, e.g. the Stoa. Apocalyptic writers had been confronted with the Stoa in the Hellenistic world. In their writings they tried to establish distance from this Hellenistic movement by emphasizing their own tradition. While the Stoa sees the Logos as the overall feature and norm for the world, apocalyptic writings only receive their norm from a revelation coming from God, and not from the cosmos. History and cosmos have an end in

²⁵⁵ Roloff, Revelation, 13.

²⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Cf. e.g. Witherington III, Revelation, 32-40; Schüssler Fiorenza, Vision of a Just World, 23; Aune, David E., Art. “Prophet/Prophetin/Prophetic”, in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2003, Vol. 6, 1704.

²⁵⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, Vision of a Just World, 24.

apocalyptic writings whereas the Stoa perceives it as an always recurrent cycle.²⁵⁹ Another important difference is the role of God. While the Stoa sees every event as a kind of mysterious event, the apocalypse stresses God's eschatological deeds and God's plan for the world which will bring an end to the suffering in history.²⁶⁰

An apocalypse is generally written in order to give answers to outer occurrences.²⁶¹ Causes for the appearance of an apocalypse can emerge in general in different crises or difficult political, societal or religious situations. An apocalypse intends to suggest solutions of earthly or cosmic problems in view of history; it intends also to comfort the righteous and is a call for repentance.²⁶² According to Moltmann, an apocalypse is subversive "underground literature" with encoded messages to groups of resistance.²⁶³ Thus it is a witness for martyrdom and not a horror story. Witherington III points out that one of the rhetorical functions of the book of Revelation is to give early Christians a perspective "especially in regard to the matters of good and evil, redemption and judgment. The book of Revelation seeks to reveal to the audience the supernatural forces at work behind the scenes that are affecting what is going on at the human level."²⁶⁴ But in all that, Revelation does not intend to give a "true" description of the afterlife but it appeals to human imagination and emotions.²⁶⁵

An apocalyptic conception of the world sees the origin of evil in the world as a fact which has to be overcome by God.²⁶⁶ This conception of the world does not see any improvement in the present reality since evil seems to be present everywhere and too strong to be overcome. For this reason, the apocalyptic worldview has its only hope in the eschatology. It is only God, the creator and judge, the one who is omniscient and omnipotent throughout the whole of history, the one whose distributive justice is assumed, who can bring a final solution for the world.²⁶⁷ With this world view, the readers of an apocalypse and as Christians having a relationship with God had a glimpse of how to be able to live in a world of evil. The

²⁵⁹ Cf. Münchow, Christoph, *Ethik und Eschatologie. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der frühjüdischen Apokalyptik mit einem Ausblick auf das Neue Testament*. Göttingen: 1981, 122.

²⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 132.

²⁶¹ Moltmann calls apocalyptic ideas "mythische Extrapolationen und Kompensationen für gegenwärtige Kampf- und Leidenserfahrungen" (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 159).

²⁶² Cf. Hellholm, David, Art. "Apokalypse", in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 1998, Vol. 1, 587.

²⁶³ Cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 159.

²⁶⁴ Witherington III, *Revelation*, 38.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 25.

²⁶⁶ Moltmann defines an apocalypse – in distinction to prophecy – as follows: „Wir sprechen von Apokalyptikern im Unterschied zu den Propheten, wenn die Vorstellungen vom zukünftigen Handeln Gottes in völliger Diskontinuität zur bisherigen Geschichte steht und also die Krise des Gerichtes Gottes weltgeschichtliche und kosmische Ausmaße annimmt.“ (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 254).

²⁶⁷ Cf. Münchow, *Ethik und Eschatologie*, 41.

perspective of distributive justice in the Eschaton could motivate them and help them to live in their present reality.²⁶⁸

Rev 20:11-15 is written in a narrative style, reporting the end of history from the viewpoint of a first person narrator. The narrator sees these events in a vision (καὶ εἶδον) and portrays it for his audience in the form of a report in the past tense. He uses the personification of Earth and Heaven, Sea, Death and Hades as an important stylistic device and draws a picture of the end of the world with simple but impressive words. Typical for the genre of an apocalypse is the use of the narrative style, and writing in a metaphorical, mythological and symbolic style. An apocalypse often contains the vision of a throne and scenes with a judge, revealing a universal eschatology with the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead, their sentence and the end of the world.²⁶⁹

Because of these reasons, since the events depicted by the narrator are not daily events of earthly history, and the crisis of the judgment becomes a matter of world historical and cosmic dimensions, Rev 20:11-15 can be classified in the genre of an apocalypse.²⁷⁰ It underlines in its descriptions of the judgment the fact that evil is in the world and, more importantly, it underlines the end of evil, thus giving hope to those suffering under it.

III. 1. e. Form criticism – Sitz-im-Leben

An apocalypse envisions a goal or a direction toward which the world is moving. This kind of literature was common at the time of writing of the book of Revelation. The traits for a “typical” apocalypse are as follows (in brackets where this trait is seen in the book of Revelation):²⁷¹

- 1) The claim that a secret revelation has been given to some seer or prophet (1:1-2).
- 2) This revelation is imparted either in a dream, a vision or transportation of the seer to heaven – often the three means are combined (1:10-11; 4:1-2).
- 3) Usually the revelation is mediated by some figure such as an angel, who has the function as guide and interpreter (17:1-2).

²⁶⁸ Cf. Münchow. He calls it the “Verdeutlichung eines Gottes- und Geschichtsverständnisses, das eine ethische Konzeption ermöglicht, die das Handeln des Gerechten in einer bedrückenden Gegenwart im Blick auf das Eschaton motiviert.” (ibid.).

²⁶⁹ Cf. Hellholm, Art. “Apokalypse“, 586.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Moltmann, Das Kommen Gottes, 254.

²⁷¹ Cf. Barr, David L., Reading the Book of Revelation. A Resource for students. Barr, David L. (Editor). Atlanta: 2003, 5.

- 4) The revelation is usually not self-explanatory, but consists in a variety of arcane symbols (e.g. animals, mythological figures, and numbers) (13:1-2; 12:1-2; 13:18).
- 5) The reception of the revelation is often attributed to some figure from the past (e.g. Isaiah, Zephaniah, Enoch, Daniel, Ezra, Adam, Peter, Moses).

Thus we should not lose touch with the whole context of the book of Revelation while studying the last judgment in Rev 20:11-15, since it is well embedded in its context and part of its larger structure. This text also has an apocalyptic structure though we cannot determine every part of it. We can notice that there is a seer who reports his vision (2), but we do not know if he sees a “secret” revelation (1). Our text does not mention the figure of a mediator (3) but it has some arcane traits (mythological figures such as Sea, Death, and Hades) and is not self-explanatory (4). In summary, we can still determine the form of this text as apocalyptic text but have to read it in its wider context of the whole book since it is not an independent story on its own.

How have apocalyptic texts been used in the early church? Schüssler Fiorenza points out that apocalyptic texts have usually been written down in order to be read aloud in a community (cf. 1:3).²⁷² The language of Revelation and its imageries have influenced in a certain manner the communities and its rituals and liturgical practices. “Nevertheless, John’s liturgical rhetoric does not seek to inculcate religious-cultic practices. Rather, it functions to interpret the symbolic-apocalyptic narrative of Revelation, which seeks to give prophetic interpretation and exhortation of the religious-political situation in which Christians find themselves at the end of the first century C.E.”²⁷³

III: 1. f. Historical context

This form of an apocalypse has probably been written by the unknown prophet John. He claims that his message has the full authority by the word of the exalted Christ itself (1:9). He was most probably not one of the twelve disciples of Jesus because he does not claim to be an eyewitness of Jesus, neither does he identify himself as apostle nor seems to be a person of old age.²⁷⁴ He claims to be in the line of the church prophets. His authority comes from a prophetic call by the risen Christ (cf. Rev 1:1). As it is written in Rev 1:9-11, John wrote this book on the island of Patmos, situated in the Aegaen Sea, which was part of Asia Minor and a Province of the Roman Empire. The book of Revelation was addressed to Christians living in

²⁷² Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 32, 103.

²⁷³ Ibid. 103.

²⁷⁴ Cf. Roloff, *Revelation*, 11.

the Roman Empire. Many verses in Revelation indicate that the Christians had been threatened²⁷⁵ and it is known that the book had been written in a time of radical social disruption and political unrest.²⁷⁶ Therefore historians investigated the reigns of the different emperors in the Roman Empire to find out if they perhaps caused the mistreatment of the Christians.

The book of Revelation was probably written after Nero's death (since Rev 17:8.11 is an allusion to his death) and no later than 120 A.D.²⁷⁷ Many scholars agree on the time of writing of the book of Revelation, even though the book itself does not indicate such a clear date. Most of the commentators date the writing in the years of the rule of the emperor Domitian in the late first century (81-96 A.D.)²⁷⁸ because according to Eusebius he was an emperor who persecuted Christians. Thompson contradicts this setting of the date of writing to Domitian's time with the argument that John's portrait of Christian persecution in the book of Revelation cannot be satisfactorily correlated with the reign of either Nero or Domitian. He emphasizes that until the second century Christians had always been regarded as a danger and were never treated as full members of society. "All of them [the emperors] considered Christianity a fanatical superstition whose members were hated for their abominations and perversity."²⁷⁹ Thus the description of Rome in Revelation "must be found within normal, not abnormal times, in established policies of the empire toward Christianity, not in eccentricities of a particular emperor."²⁸⁰

No matter which of the two scenarios is favoured, it is clear, that Christians, living as minority and members of a foreign religion in Asia Minor, were under great economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life although there was no official policy of persecution yet.²⁸¹ They were under pressure to take part at Roman trade guilds and idolatrous feasts and cultic practices as well as the imperial cult.²⁸² It is not sure to what extent

²⁷⁵ E.g. 1:9; 2:2-3.9-10.13; 3:8.10.

²⁷⁶ Thompson, Leonhard L., *Reading the Book of Revelation. A Resource for Students*. Barr, David L. (Editor). Atlanta: 2003, 29.

²⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 27.

²⁷⁸ The first Historian who made the assumption that the book of Revelation had been written during the rule of Domitian was the Church Father Eusebius (cf. *ibid.* 29-34). Most of the scholars of Revelation therefore tend to date it likewise (cf. e.g. Kehl, Medard, *Eschatologie*. Würzburg: 1986, 164; Roloff, *Revelation*, 9, Osborne, *Revelation*, 9). Thompson date the time of writing between 70 and 120 A.D. (cf. Thompson, *Reading the Book of Revelation*, 36).

²⁷⁹ Thompson, *Reading the Book of Revelation*, 36.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ The first official policy concerning Christians came from the emperor Trajan in the beginning of the second century. He officially proclaimed that Christians should not be hunted down but if they were tried or accused of something they should be killed simply for being Christians. Thompson points out that for more than two centuries the Roman authorities were tolerant and non-interventional, even though the Christians did not worship their gods who were "the foundation of life and peace in the empire" (*ibid.* 37).

²⁸² Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 11.

persecution against Christians took place. But when Christians refused to participate in the official Roman life they were confronted, naturally, with a great antipathy and also had to deal with social exclusion. This affliction could intensify to the point of imprisonment and death (cf. 2:10; 13:10). “While there is no developed persecution in the book, there was a great deal of daily opposition as well as signs of intensification on the near horizon.”²⁸³

The book of Revelation shows the religious and spiritual resistance of the few Christians of Asia Minor against the Roman Empire. The totality of the Roman State is expressed in the imperial cult of the Caesar,²⁸⁴ shown e.g. in 13:4.14-17; 14:9; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4. In the Roman Empire, the emperor was seen as earthly representative of the gods, as mediator between the gods and the people.²⁸⁵ This imperial cult was probably more developed and prominent under Domitian than under Nero’s time. The people living in the Roman Empire were supposed to honour the emperor as the earthly representation of the gods. Especially the cities in Asia Minor, to whom the letters of Revelation are addressed, were the epicentre of the imperial cult. The cities competed for the privilege of erecting a temple.²⁸⁶ Christians who refused to offer divine veneration of Caesar (“*aut Christus aut Caesar*”²⁸⁷) had to bear consequences, such as being excluded from society. They had to undergo suffering and were persecuted. Thus John emphasizes that Christ, and not human powers, is the Lord over the world and history (e.g. Rev 1:8). Christ is the one who will finish Satan’s fight against the world and his Church. In this conflict between the state and the church there was no compromise: the church could only go the way of “passive resistance and of obedience toward her Lord.”²⁸⁸ The book of Revelation has been written for the purpose of giving comfort and hope to those who suffered in the Roman Empire due to their faith.²⁸⁹ It wanted to tell them that finally the faithful would be the victors; the chosen ones would not die. In this sense, the last judgment emphasizes the saving justice for the victims and not a judgment orientated towards the perpetrators. Revelation “presents a counterreality [sic!] to the prevailing reality of the Roman world”²⁹⁰ thus intending to persuade the readers to take action against pressures to conform to pagan ways. The book intends to give confidence to the faithful to keep on, and to warn the weak against compromise. John also wants the faithful to

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Roloff, Revelation, 9.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Osborne, Revelation, 6.

²⁸⁶ Cf. ibid. 7.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Kehl, Eschatologie, 166.

²⁸⁸ Roloff, Revelation, 10.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Kehl, Eschatologie, 165.

²⁹⁰ Osborne, Revelation, 11.

know that God will justify them for their suffering.²⁹¹ This book intends to make people aware of the consequences their lives on earth will have in the afterlife.

We see in the book of Revelation that it has an intensive expectation for the second coming of Christ (παρουσία).²⁹² The people expected Christ to come back very soon and they expected him to redeem them from their sufferings. This is an explanation why the people lived so close with the expectation of the last judgment. Furthermore, they expected the resurrection of the saints and the transformation of the whole world.²⁹³ Christ is shown in Revelation as the king over the earth (e.g. 15:3; 17:14), the judge (e.g. 20:11) and the creator (e.g. 21:1). All these pictures stress God's mightiness. In the struggle between Roman Empire and church, the book of Revelation points out that all powers opposing God will soon have exhausted themselves and that Christ's ultimate victory, already reality in heaven, will soon manifest on earth.²⁹⁴

III. 1. g. History of expressions and motifs

III. 1. g. α. The motif of the books

III. 1. g. α. 1.) The book of life

The book of life plays a different role to the books of deeds in Rev 20:11-15. It is the book (as a kind of heavenly record) in which those person's names are written who are considered worthy or righteous in God's eyes. The book of life is mentioned several times in Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12.15; 21:27). It is possible that this refers back to Ex 32:32.²⁹⁵ This motif of a book of life in which names are recorded and in which these names can be erased again is extremely widespread in the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism and Christianity²⁹⁶ and thus it serves as a metaphor for judgment.²⁹⁷ To be "blotted out" (e.g. Ex 32:32) of the book of life is a metaphorical description of dying. According to ideas of the Hebrew Bible only those are saints who are written in the book of life, who honour God and who are supposed to be saved.²⁹⁸

²⁹¹ Cf. *ibid.* 12.

²⁹² Cf. Brandenburger, Egon, Art. "Gericht Gottes, Neues Testament", in: TRE, Berlin-New York 1984, Vol. XII, 479.

²⁹³ Cf. Krodel, Revelation, 338.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Roloff, Revelation, 10.

²⁹⁵ "But now, if you will forgive their sin- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." (Ex 32:32).

²⁹⁶ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 223. E.g. literature like: 1 Enoch 108:3; Jub. 30:22; T. Jacob 7:27-18; Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3; 1 Clem 53:4; Hermas Vis. 1.3.2.).

²⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 224.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Schrenk, Art. "βίβλος, βιβλίον", in: THWNT, Stuttgart 1932/33, Vol. I, 618.

The book of life was seen as a kind of heavenly citizen registry. The primary setting of the book of life in Judaism and early Christianity was the judgment scene where God was thought sitting upon a throne. This imagery probably came from the ancient Near Eastern royal court where records for the king were made so that he was able to judge according to these records. The idea itself goes back to Sumerian and Akkadian literature.²⁹⁹ We also find the idea of a book of life in Greek literature. Whenever a citizen of Athens was sentenced to be executed for a crime, his name was first erased from the roll of the citizens of the city.³⁰⁰ It is interesting to see that Mealy relates the throne in Rev 20:11 with the New Jerusalem and thus sees the book of life as the roll book of the citizens of the New Jerusalem.³⁰¹

In the NT, we find that the imagery of the book of life has changed. The criterion for being written in the book of life is apparently faith to God rather than any type of system of predestination. This can be concluded from the given possibility of erasing one's name from the book of life (cf. Rev 17:8). The imagery of the book of life in the New Testament has its emphasis on the certainty of the congregation of salvation. God elected the congregation through Christ to life and through what Christ did on the cross.³⁰² This is the basis for Christians – and faith is thus the basis for being written in the book of life (cf. Rev 13:8).

Boring calls this book the “book of grace, the Lamb’s book of life”.³⁰³ In this book, names are written before the creation of the world (13:8; 17:8) as a matter of God’s grace. Those who are saved from the eternal death are saved through God’s grace and not through their deeds.³⁰⁴ The decisive factor for being saved in the last judgment is not what is written in the books of deeds but what is written in the book of life (20:15).

III. 1. g. α. 2.) The books of deeds

The theme of the books of deeds, recording the deeds of both the righteous and the unrighteous, is portrayed in Rev 20:11-15 in accordance with traditional apocalyptic imagery of Judaism³⁰⁵, the Hebrew Bible³⁰⁶ and also the NT³⁰⁷. In Judaism, these books are often

²⁹⁹ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 223. Cf. Ezra 4:15 and Esth 6:1.

³⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 225.

³⁰¹ Cf. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 181.

³⁰² Cf. Schrenk, Art. “βίβλος, βιβλίον“, 619.

³⁰³ Boring, *Interpretation*, 212.

³⁰⁴ “We are ultimately responsible for what we do, for it has eternal consequences – we are judged by works. God is ultimately responsible for our salvation, it is his deed that saves, not ours – we are saved by grace.” (Boring, *Interpretation*, 212).

³⁰⁵ E.g. 1 Enoch 89:61-64; 90:17-20; 104:7; 108:7; 2 Enoch 19:3-5, 2 B 24:1. Cf. 4 Ezra 6:20: “When the seal is placed upon the age that is about to pass away, then I will show these signs: the books shall be opened before the face of the firmament, and all shall see my judgment together.”

conceived as two books: one for the deeds of the righteous and one for the deeds of the wicked.³⁰⁸ In the old Orient, we find also the myth of heavenly tablets, recording the destiny and history of the world and of people before their birth.³⁰⁹

The fact that human deeds are recorded in these books and that the dead are judged by their works gives people enormous responsibility for their lives and the afterlife. In the same way, human freedom is estimated very highly since people can choose what to do and what to refrain from.

In the book of Revelation (20:12d.f.13c) we see exactly the same picture: the dead are judged according to their deeds, written in the books of deeds, but they are not condemned according to what is written in those books. John applies an imagery which was very familiar to his audience.

III. 1. g. β. The motif of the throne

The introductory sentence in verse 11 “And I saw a great white throne” leads to the presumption that the following scene will take place “before the throne” (12c). Therefore it is important to have an impression how the throne had been portrayed throughout the book of Revelation.

The first reference of the throne is found in Rev 1:4-7. The picture of the throne is tied with the picture of heaven or the “heavenly temple”³¹⁰ since “he is coming with the clouds”. This imagery is confirmed in chapters 4-5 where John is taken up to heaven. John relates the imagery of the throne with the heavenly temple not because he sees the earthly temple as an exact portrayal of the heavenly temple but because he “is experiencing as visual metaphors the heavenly realities to which the earthly tabernacle/temple and its furniture correspond.”³¹¹ According to Mealy, the image of the heavenly temple expresses both God’s transcendence from the world and God’s intimate relationship with God’s people.³¹²

Another idea, closely connected with the portrayal of the throne, is the idea of the parousia. God’s parousia is often seen in connection with the motif of the throne. God’s coming will be a time where neither the wicked humanity nor the creation will be able to bear God’s anger

³⁰⁶ E.g. Esth 6:1-3; Isa 4:3; Mal 3:16; Dan 7:10; Dan 12:1; Pss 56:9; 139:16; Isa 65:6; Jer 22:30.

³⁰⁷ E.g. Phil 4:3; Luk 10:20; Heb 12:23.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Aune, Revelation, 224.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Schrenk, Art. “βιβλος, βιβλίον”, 619; Aune, Revelation, 224.

³¹⁰ Cf. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 143.

³¹¹ Ibid. 145.

³¹² Cf. ibid. 151.

and all creation will disintegrate before him.³¹³ We see that the One sitting on the throne is being respected so highly as the One to whom everyone shows respect (Rev 4:2.5.6) that even creation is not able to stay in its presence.

Rev 6:16-17 shows the parousia of God, of the Enthroned One. This parousia is parallelized with the parousia of Christ. We can see that John does not differentiate between God and Christ. Both of them are present in the parousia and on the throne. God and Christ are both intertwined and not separate; both sit on the throne.³¹⁴ Rev 6:16-17 describes God's anger over the whole earth where no one will be able to stand.

Whereas Rev 6:16-17 describes that standing before God's throne and in God's full presence means to encounter judgment and to bear God's anger, Rev 7:15-17 give a completely different impression: those who stand before the throne and "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" will see deliverance, joy and life. Thus we see that the imagery of the throne is closely connected with both anger and joy.

The motif of the throne appears again in Rev 11:19, the opening of the temple of God. This is another image for God's parousia. "John's wording of 11:19 expresses the same idea (heaven opening to reveal the parousia of the enthroned One) in the same context (a final confrontation with wicked humanity – 11:18), except that here he describes the revelation of God's throne in terms of the system of temple metaphors, and refrains from explicit mention of Christ."³¹⁵ The same pattern is used in Rev 16:17-21. John firstly describes the final confrontation between God and wicked humanity (cf. 6:16-17; 11:18; 16:14; 19), secondly the attention drawn to the throne (cf. 6:16; 11:19; 16:17), thirdly he describes some "elements denoting the awesome revelation of God upon his throne"³¹⁶ (cf. 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18) and fourthly the reaction of creation (cf. 6:12-14; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18-21).³¹⁷

Rev 19:5-7, preceding the revelation of Jesus on a white horse, again takes the motif of the throne by describing a triumphal liturgy before the throne of God. This description has similarities with the throne scenes in Rev 7:9-12 and 11:15-17, because it denotes the parousia "not only as an occasion of wrath, but also as one of rejoicing. It all depends on what group of people is facing the throne. For God's saints, whom he has saved from the 'great tribulation', the parousia means triumph and vibrant celebration before the throne. But for

³¹³ This idea is taken from Isaiah and other writers of the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Jer 4:23-26; Ps 102:25-26; Isa 51:6; Rev 6:14-16.

³¹⁴ Cf. Rev 3:21: "The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."

³¹⁵ Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 154f.

³¹⁶ Ibid. 155.

³¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

God's enemies, and indeed for creation itself, the parousia means terrible exposure and destruction before the very same throne."³¹⁸

What exactly does "the throne" in Revelation refer to? For John, the imagery of the throne is the metaphorical "place" where God's holiness and power are revealed.³¹⁹ We see that the author of Revelation not only used texts of the Hebrew Bible in order to connect the imagery of the throne in Revelation to well-familiar pictures, but he also introduced the readers from the beginning of the book to the imagery of the throne (the heavenly temple, the non-separation of God and Christ, the parousia³²⁰, the inability of the creation to bear its presence, the judgment) so that in the end in Rev 20 the readers of the book of Revelation would be able to connect all different aspects of the throne in John's introductory sentence: "And I saw a great white throne".

Mealy gives another impression of the throne by continuing reading the last chapters of the book. He relates God's throne with the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:10), which became the throne of God and the Lamb, "the place of their eschatological dwelling"³²¹.

Rev 20:11 depicts the throne as "great" and "white". The thrones of gods in other religions are usually described as extremely large (e.g. the throne of the god Baal in the ancient Canaan).³²² The description of YHWH's throne in Isa 6:1 and of the cherubim throne of God in 1 Ki 6:23-28 had also been thought to be large in size. It may be that the adjective μέγας in Rev 20:11 refers to this tradition.³²³ The colour white is probably used in order to show the purity and holiness of the throne and the person sitting on it. It is also the colour appropriate for heaven.³²⁴ This is the way the colour white has been associated throughout the whole book.³²⁵ In having a look at the whole book of Revelation we find no other reference of the greatness of God's throne and its shining colour in the previous chapters. This is striking because the author seems to "play" with well-known imageries in his book. The depiction of

³¹⁸ Ibid. 156.

³¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.* 145.147.

³²⁰ Mealy sees Rev 20:11 as another description of the same parousia, mentioned already in 6:12-17; 7:9-17; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 19:11. Thus he regards the mention of heaven and earth flying from God's presence as happening at God's parousia, not at the judgment (*ibid.* 164-167).

³²¹ Ibid. 175.

³²² Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1100.

³²³ Cf. *ibid.* 1100 and Osborne, *Revelation*, 720.

³²⁴ Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1100; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 25; cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 720. Mealy, describe the colour white as symbol for heaven and purity (Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 158).

³²⁵ Osborne describes it as follows: "Christ has white hair (1:14), sits on a white cloud (14:4), and returns on a white horse (19:11); celestial beings wear white (4:4); the triumphant saints wear white (3:4.5; 6:11; 7:9.13) and return with Christ on white horses (19:14). The "white throne" sums up all these themes (this is the last appearance of "white" in the book). It is a throne of purity and triumph and so rightly stands as the throne of judgment." (Osborne, *Revelation*, 720).

the colour and size of the throne does not fit in with the other imageries since it is not well-known to his audience.

III. 1. h. History of religion

The motif of the last judgment is very old. The oldest pictures known to us come from the Egypt during the time of the Pharaohs. Here the judge Osiris leads the judgment while Ma'at weights the souls according to their good and evil deeds.³²⁶ For the people in the time of John, the motif of the end of the world is not new. Already in the Hebrew Bible we find late prophetic writings³²⁷ which flourished from 200 B.C. to 100 A.D.

In the book of Revelation, most of the apocalyptic features are present, especially in the form of visions in a narrative framework. It was common in ancient times to raise the topic of divine Revelation and judgment in a prophetic letter.³²⁸ Also the New Testament has apocalyptic writings such as the so called synoptic apocalypse (Mat 24, Mar 13, Luk 21) and the book of Revelation. It seems as if John wrote intentionally in the style of the Hebrew and Aramaic in order “to remind his readers of the biblical language of the Old Testament”³²⁹. This kind of literature and its motifs, dealing with human life and its place in the overall scheme of world and afterlife, trying to give something a meaning and hope in the present situation³³⁰, were therefore not new for the readers. They all have a dualism in common which exists on different levels e.g. a cosmic dualism (God and another power, but God is more powerful than God's adversary), a temporal dualism (present time and afterlife), a local dualism (earthly sphere and non-earthly sphere) and an ethical dualism (righteous and unrighteous).³³¹

The last judgment is a traditional eschatological imagery which derived from the role of the kings as dispensers of justice.³³² The people were standing before the throne, waiting for their sentence. They lived in the expectation of the coming judgment and John formulated what they already believed. The language of images, as it is used in the entire book of Revelation,

³²⁶ Cf. Moltmann, *In The End*, 140.

³²⁷ E.g. Isa 24-27.66, Zec 12-14, Dan 2 and 7 (“A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.” (Dan 7:10)), Joe 3, Ez 37-39, 40-48 and the apocryphal writing of 1 and 2 Enoch, the Syrian Baruch, 4 Ezra and other apocalyptic writings.

³²⁸ Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 12.

³²⁹ Roloff, *Revelation*, 12.

³³⁰ Cf. Münchow, *Ethik und Eschatologie*, 124.

³³¹ Cf. *ibid.* 125.

³³² Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1104.

was part of the intellectual tradition in which the author as well as the audience lived.³³³ John utilizes conventional mythological language and traditional symbols as a shared code for narrating the end and beyond of human history and thus allowing a mutual understanding between seer and audience.³³⁴ This can be seen e.g. in 4 Ezra 7:26-35³³⁵, a text which is very similar to Rev 20:11-15.

The apocalyptic book 4 Ezra, written probably after the fall of the second Temple in both Hebrew and Aramaic,³³⁶ has its emphasis on the law, and how the fulfilment of the law leads to final salvation. As we can see, it stresses the ethical difference between the righteous and unrighteous which shall become obvious at the last judgment (4 Ezra 7:34f). 4 Ezra tries with its eschatology to “prove” that the right fulfilment of the law will lead the righteous to salvation. Thus the portrayal of judgment has its emphasis on the eschatological relevance of doing the law. In showing this, 4 Ezra contrasts the righteous and the wicked and their fate in the last judgment in order to highlight their ethically correct and incorrect behaviour on earth.³³⁷

Similar to 4 Ezra, the apocalyptic book of 2 Baruch describes the importance of the law for the last judgment. 2 Baruch does not see the law as possibility to improve the present reality but as the way to the Eschaton and as norm for the last judgment. This does not necessarily include exhortation for the earthly life but the present is seen as time of preparation and qualification for the Eschaton. Thus 2 Baruch has its emphasis on the present time with its problems and tries to show a way out of this hopeless time into the time of the afterlife.³³⁸

In these portrayals of the last judgment in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, we find many similarities with Rev 20:11-15 for example the seat/throne, the action which seems to emanate from this seat, the coming of the dead from different places under the earth and the judgment according

³³³ Cf. Roloff, Revelation, 14.

³³⁴ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, Vision of a Just World, 25, 104.

³³⁵ (26) For indeed the time will come, when the signs that I have foretold to you will come to pass, that the city that now is not seen shall appear, and the land that now is hidden shall be disclosed. (27) Everyone who has been delivered from the evils that I have foretold shall see my wonders. (28) For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. (29) After those years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. (30) Then the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings, so that no one shall be left. (31) After seven days the world that is not yet awake shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish. (32) The earth shall give up those who are asleep in it, and the dust those who rest there in silence; and the chambers shall give up the souls that have been committed to them. (33) The Most High shall be revealed on the seat of judgment, and compassion shall pass away, and patience shall be withdrawn. (34) Only judgment shall remain, truth shall stand, and faithfulness shall grow strong. (35) Recompense shall follow, and the reward shall be manifested; righteous deeds shall awake, and unrighteous deeds shall not sleep. (New Revised Standard Version).

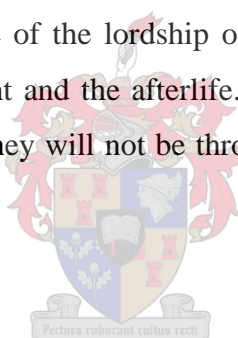
³³⁶ Cf. Münchow, Ethik und Eschatologie, 76. 93.

³³⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 94.

³³⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 111.

to what is written in the books of deeds. But there is also an important difference: whereas the apocalyptic writings have their emphasis on the law and showing the right behaviour as a way to escape the final punishment, Rev 20:11-15 does not even mention the law but narrates the judgment of the dead “according to their deeds”. In addition, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch do not mention the book of life. This emphasizes its importance in Rev 20:11-15.

By comparing the book of Revelation with other early Jewish or Christian mystics, we see that John did not only focus on heaven and the afterlife, but on both earth and heaven. Witherington III is of the opinion that this is exactly where John is in line with many other biblical writers and prophets who believed that God’s redemption and judgment was still to come in space and time.³³⁹ John has an historical and eschatological dimension which can be found in the description of the destruction of earth and heaven, followed by the description of a new earth as well as a new heaven.³⁴⁰ “The seer is concerned about both a heaven that is spatially near and events that are thought to be at least possibly temporally near.”³⁴¹ Eschatological and historical views are intertwined. In this sense the most important issue in the book of Revelation is the theme of the lordship of Christ³⁴² who is Lord over earth in history and in heaven, over judgment and the afterlife. This view entails God’s promise for those who are faithful unto death. They will not be thrown into the lake of fire but will have eternal life (cf. Rev 20:4).



III. 2. Homiletical reflection

In this homiletical reflection I will consider how a contemporary audience could deal with the notion of the last judgment in a sermon. I will reflect on how common the idea of the last judgment might be in our societies and with what kind of reactions, questions and fears the audience might meet a text like Rev 20:11-15. I will furthermore consider the different types of dualism showed in the text and how the audience is confronted itself dualist structures in their lives. Finally, I will look at the notion of re-creation after the last judgment and how this might find its equivalent in our time.

³³⁹ “As such, he shares an essential kinship with other prophets and seers in the Jewish and Christian traditions who are concerned about the future of God’s people not merely in heaven but on earth.” (Witherington III, Revelation, 37).

³⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² Cf. Roloff, Revelation, 8. Osborne calls it the sovereignty of God (Osborne, Revelation, 724).

The idea of the last judgment with its books and the record of deeds in a book is very common in our days. This idea is present in media and literature,³⁴³ which might lead to the conclusion that the last judgment is very present in churches and preached from the pulpits very intensely. Surprisingly this is not the case – at least not in Germany. According to the German lectionary of sermons, Rev 20:11-15 has not been on the lectionary at least since 1977.³⁴⁴ These reflections lead to the very general question of why the church in Germany avoids preaching about the last judgment although its idea is familiar to the people. Or should the question be the other way round: Why is the idea of the last judgment so widely spread although the church does not preach about it?

Reading and listening to Rev 20:11-15 entails a huge challenge for people nowadays. This text, which cannot simply be transferred from its time of origin into our days, plays with many pictures and imageries which are not easy to understand. These pictures are a way of communication like a language or grammar, but they are not separable from their historical context.³⁴⁵ They do not intend to give a precise portrayal of events in life and afterlife.

On the part of the audience, Rev 20 might provoke different reactions: one reaction approves God's action, since it can be understood as just punishment and reward for a well led earthly life. The audience might think: "Those of the dead who are thrown into the lake of fire are the 'bad' people. God does the right thing in not tolerating their earthly behaviour and punishing their bad deeds. The people are responsible for what they do and should thus be able to bear the consequences".³⁴⁶ Another reaction of the audience might be to disapprove of God's punishment because it leaves them uncertain of God's way of punishment. "Where would I be? Can I claim to be on the 'right side', to be written in the book of life? Does God preordain whether I would be written in the book of life? Or did it result from my constant

³⁴³ This can be seen e.g. with an example from a TV-advertisement which I saw in South Africa in the movies of a cell phone company in which the leading actor comes after his death to a heavenly (male and white) judge (having a long beard) with a big book. After having found the not yet expired cell phone contract amongst all other earthly deeds and habits the dead person is being sent back to earth by the judge. This advertisement may show that the idea of the last judgment is very present amongst the people.

³⁴⁴ Germany has six lectionaries which are read in succession in the church year. As far as I could find out, Rev 20:11-15 has not been in these German lectionaries since 1977 and probably also not in earlier times. In terms of the spreading of the idea of the last judgment in Germany, the situation is approximately similar to in South Africa. Cf. e.g. "Gottesdienstpraxis", 1978-1989, edited by Erhard Domay and Horst Nietschke, Gütersloh: 1978-1989. See "Gottesdienstpraxis, Serie A. Arbeitshilfen für die Gestaltung der Gottesdienste im Kirchenjahr" 1990 – 2002, edited by Erhard Domay, Gütersloh: 1990-2002. Cf. also "Neue Calwer Predigthilfen", Jahrgänge I-VI, 1979-1984, edited by Hans Bornhäuser, Herbert Breit, Gerhard Hennig, Horst Dietrich Preuß, Jürgen Roloff, Theo Sorg; Stuttgart: 1979-1984. Cf. "Predigstudien zu den Perikopenreihen", 1977-2004/2005, edited by Peter Krusche, Ernst Lange, Dietrich Rössler, Roman Roessler; Stuttgart: 1977-2004/5. The most common texts taken from Revelation as part of the lectionaries are texts from chapters 1; 2; 3; 5; 7; 8; 15; 21.

³⁴⁵ Münchow describes it as follows: "Die Apokalypse ist [...] zu verstehen als eine Antwort auf die historische Herausforderung des [...] Glaubens und nicht als Sammlung zeitloser, von der historischen Situation ablösbarer Theologumena." (Münchow, Ethik und Eschatologie, 122).

³⁴⁶ Osborne expresses this twofold aspect very clearly: the saints will have forgiveness and reward, the sinners will come into the lake of fire (Osborne, Revelation, 725).

refusal to hear God's call?" These thoughts might be followed by confusion about God's grace: "Is it possible that this God, Christ's father, is able to condemn those people whom he loves? How can a loving God be able to stop loving someone and throw him/her into the lake of fire – and this not only as an intermediate punishment but at the end of the days?"

The audience may compare this judgment to a court in our days, where the guilty will be punished and the innocent will be found not guilty. This can be well understood on the one hand since it is the human model of justice, but on the other hand it will raise fear because of its finality. Even in a "normal" human court the sentence will in most cases be for a certain time, but not for ever. And even if one got a sentence for life, one can be comforted that the afterlife with God will be different from the earthly life. But now the audience are confronted with Rev 20: is it the continuation of the earthly sentence? Should it at a certain stage not be enough with punishment and sentences? An audience of the South African context might be reminded of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was a commission which tried to give an open space for the so called victims and perpetrators of apartheid. In contrary to "normal" courts where those who confess frankly receive their just sentence, the TRC granted full amnesty to those who spoke the truth during the hearings.³⁴⁷ With the TRC, the audience might have met another model of justice which actually had its focus on reconciliation, although this model still has the dualistic system of guilt or innocence. The TRC-model might remind the audience that the justice in "normal" earthly courts is not the only one which is possible on earth – and this is far truer for heavenly justice.

Rev 20:11-15 is shaped by its dualism having a certain impact on people reading the text. The cosmic dualism of the fleeing Earth and Heaven and the dead standing before the throne which is obviously situated neither on Earth nor in Heaven; the dualism of the powerless dead and God's almighty presence; the temporal dualism of the judgment happening in the end of the days when human temporal dimensions are nonessential; and the ethical dualism drawing pictures of black and white, bad and good, unrighteous and righteous can provoke uncertainty, anger and a lack of understanding on the audiences' part. This might remind the audience of their daily life where they themselves are often seen by others as only "black" or "white", as "bad" or "good", as "righteous" or "unrighteous". These categories can function as support of human lives in order to be able to deal with others, but it can also be experienced as restriction to one specific group or pattern. The audience, realizing that they are often put into a scheme of things and thus restricted to a certain group, might also notice that they themselves often do the same in judging others and putting them into a scheme of things. It

³⁴⁷ For further information about formation, development and course of the TRC, the interested readers can e.g. read Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull*, Johannesburg: 2002.

seems as if the motif of judging someone as “good” or “bad” is very familiar to human thought.

The place where the throne is and the last judgment takes place is not imaginable. It is neither earth nor heaven. This place is beyond every imagination since the audience is barely able to imagine heaven, and now the text tells that the last judgment takes place at a place where even Heaven has to flee.³⁴⁸ This may raise anxiety about the end of the world and its final judgment. Is this the description of the end of the world? The scenery at the end of the world is very familiar to the audiences’ world these days. They are very often confronted in their daily life with the end of the world. The end of the world is not only portrayed in movies and books or by fundamentalist religious movements but also by wars, terrorism, nuclear forces, chemical forces, environmental pollution and the change of climate which are all existential threats to our world. This threat is not easy to bear. According to Körtner, the end of the world has drawn nearer, especially in the last century. The world in flames is a reality to people in our days and the threat of this end is proclaimed through many ways to people. This is the reason why some people tend to have a teleological thinking,³⁴⁹ orientated towards the end. Their fear of the end of the world is understandable because the end of the world would be irrevocable – and if the last judgment were to come it too is also irrevocable.

Rev 20:11-15 might not only raise people’s fear of the end of the world but also the fear of being helpless and subject to God’s mercy. This text makes clear that people have no power at all in the last judgment. It stresses God’s power and omnipotence. The understanding of this image of God might be shaped by the tradition of many pictures and portrayals of the last judgment in the last centuries. Many churches in the Middle Ages developed their picture of the scene of the last judgment from Rev 20:11-15. These pictures show only two judgments: the “good” will receive the eternal life and the “bad” will receive eternal punishment and death. These pictures were a method to spread fear and terror so that the people were willing to search for their comfort within the church.³⁵⁰ Moltmann emphasizes that originally the final judgment was the victims’ hope as last instance to bring justice to them and their oppressors. Only after the turn of Constantine, when Christianity became the official religion, the last judgment had been understood as punishment for the perpetrators.³⁵¹ It turned from the

³⁴⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza speaks about events beyond space and time (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 104).

³⁴⁹ Cf. Körtner, Ulrich H. J., *The End of the World. A Theological Interpretation*. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Louisville, Kentucky: 1995, 266.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 262.

³⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*

expectation of saving justice for the victims into a moral judgment orientated towards the perpetrators, expressed with the motto: “measure for measure”.³⁵²

This might be the picture people have in mind when they listen to Rev 20:11-15. They might be afraid of not being good enough during their earthly life for the last judgment and thus being condemned by God for their earthly deeds. This raises the audiences’ question of how a good life according to God’s will might look like so that God will grant the audience eternal life for what they did on earth. Certainly the audience will also be confronted with the question of whether it is at all possible to lead a life which can satisfy God’s demands.³⁵³

A sermon on Rev 20:11-15 is supposed to deal with some of these anxieties and questions. This is necessary in order to create an honest atmosphere where people feel that they are accepted with all their fears and problems with the Christian belief in the last judgment. Being a Christian does not mean to have no questions or to be without doubts. But the sermon should not dwell on people’s anxiety. It is important to have a closer look at the background of Rev 20. This background will show that the text probably has been written in a context of persecution where Christians had to suffer for their faith. The motif of the last judgment thus includes the notion of justice. Finally, after earthly injustice, God makes sure that God saw what people went through during their lives. God will care about the retribution. Thus Rev 20 is not only a text about the last judgment but also about the question of suffering and God’s involvement in it. This deals with the question of theodicy.³⁵⁴ It finally places God on the side of the suffering people since it presumes that God condemns the unrighteous. God will not give up God’s people – and Rev 20 is a way for people to not give up God. People today, both connected to the church or not, are familiar with suffering and injustice. They might experience it in different ways which are probably not comparable with John’s audience but the feeling of injustice, suffering and unrighteousness due to one’s faith and the longing for justice for everyone, the great and the small, is well known. People in the church often experience non-understanding on the part of the government and/or society when it comes to the living of the Christian faith. People’s longing for justice can therefore be well-understood by the audience today.

Another aspect of Rev 20:11-15 is the aspect of re-creation. The last judgment as such is not the end of the world but the penultimate event to come. As Rev 21 with the promise of the new creation with a new heaven, a new earth and God’s presence on earth follows the

³⁵² Cf. Moltmann, *In The End*, 142.

³⁵³ This is the question how it is possible that people are judged by their works yet Paul says clearly that no one is justified before God by works (cf. e.g. Rom 3:27-28; Gal 2:16; 3:19; Eph 2:8).

³⁵⁴ Cf. Witherington III, *Revelation*, 40.

description of the last judgment in Rev 20, the audience see that life continues. It continues not in the way as it was before but without any oppressing and dehumanizing powers. God's judgment brings salvation for the earth and for those who have not cooperated with evil, destruction and murder.³⁵⁵ This description of the end of evil and a good creation to come can be well understood by the audience today. It meets their own inner longing for peace, justice and re-creation.³⁵⁶ This is a longing for a new beginning, for no more desperation and tears, for someone creating righteousness on earth and for God being present on earth, who puts all things right again.

Seeing the last judgment from this angle it might be possible, though the text raises many questions, to create a deeper understanding of the text on the audiences' part so that the notion of the last judgment may no longer be a notion of anxiety and fear but a notion of joy about God's righteousness and kingdom to come.³⁵⁷

III. 3. Systematic reflection

In this chapter I will adopt Jürgen Moltmann's approach of the idea of the last judgment. He does not investigate a specific text about the last judgment but has a more general and systematic view on it. I will examine the different approaches he undertakes in order to come closer to the model of the double ending of the last judgment and the model of the universal salvation.³⁵⁸

The idea of the last judgment deciding the fate of the dead has been common to human understanding since the earliest religions. This idea served mainly two purposes: it entails the notion of a just retribution in the afterlife for the earthly life and thus has the function of theodicy. God's judgment will bring the necessary final balance between good and bad. The second main purpose is the idea of a moral education on earth. The last judgment serves in the struggle against immorality, for ethical values and against heresy as strong argument for "good" behaviour³⁵⁹, thus emphasizing the aspect of punishment. This aspect entails the double notion of hope and fear. Hope, because those who had to undergo suffering during

³⁵⁵ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision of a Just World*, 104.

³⁵⁶ Cf. also Moltmann, *In The End*, 145.

³⁵⁷ Moltmann expresses this as follows: „Es ist an der Zeit, *das Evangelium vom Gericht Gottes* zu entdecken und *Freude an der kommenden Gerechtigkeit Gottes* zu erwecken.“ (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 262f.).

³⁵⁸ These models are called "doppelter Gerichts Ausgang" and "Allversöhnung". For further interest and a closer look at details, the readers are invited to read his books: "Das Kommen Gottes. Christliche Eschatologie" and "In The End – The Beginning. The Life Of Hope".

³⁵⁹ Cf. Hjelde, Sigurd, Art. "Gericht Gottes, Religionsgeschichtlich", in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2000, Vol. 3, 731.

their lifetime hoped to finally receive justice: they would be redeemed, whereas their perpetrators would be punished for what they did to them. Fear, because the punishment of those who are not written in the book of life seems to be everlasting and definite. Martin Luther calls this fear the fear of being rejected by God, which comes from the knowledge of God's true will and God's rejection of sin.³⁶⁰

With the ideas of hope and fear, of the double ending of the judgment, the last judgment entails many questions: does this double ending really exist? Or is it rather that in the end the universal salvation will come true and everyone will be part of the new creation? The last judgment entails the question concerning God: is this God the one who goes with God's people into death and resurrection or is God the one whose task is to redeem and condemn, thus being the uninvolved judge? How is it possible that a loving God not only condemns the bad side in God's creation but the whole of humanity?³⁶¹

We can look at the last judgment from two different perspectives: from the perspective of God or the perspective of humans. Looking at it from God's perspective, we see God as being in the centre. God is shown as responsible for salvation and condemnation, as the one who knows about human righteousness and ~~unrighteousness~~. With God being in the centre, human beings seem to be helpless since God's power is too strong for them. This powerful image can lead to despair.

We can also look at the last judgment with the human being in the centre: humans can decide during their life time whether their deeds are the right deeds in order to survive the last judgment. The earthly life seems to be powerful enough in order to make a change in the afterlife. With this view, humans are still confronted with the question as to whether what they do would be enough for their salvation. It is likely that humans as masters and executioners of their own fate will despair with this huge claim. With this view, God's role is seen only as the executor of justice who accompanies the free choice of humans.³⁶² Moltmann points out that there is nothing uniquely Christian about these views. These views can be found in similar ways in many other cultures and religions.³⁶³

These reflections raise the question as to whether it is the Trinitarian God as God Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is the judge. The idea of the Trinitarian God does not emphasize only on only God the father but also on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We know Jesus Christ from another perspective: the perspective of the weak. Is Jesus as judge able to judge

³⁶⁰ Cf. Stock, Konrad, Art. "Gericht Gottes, Dogmatisch", in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2000, Vol. 3, 737.

³⁶¹ Moltmann does also ask some of these questions (cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 263).

³⁶² Cf. Moltmann, *In The End*, 141.

³⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*

according to another justice than that which he lived and proclaimed on earth? Moltmann too asks the question whether the justice of the last judgment can be any other justice than God's redeeming and righteous justice, witnessed by the law and the prophets and the justifying justice which was proclaimed by Paul.³⁶⁴ If the last judgment was God's final account with the saints and the sinners, it would really be the ultimate thing. But if the last judgment was a means to reveal God's righteousness in order to create a peaceful new world for all eternity, the last judgment would be only the penultimate event.³⁶⁵ With this view, all human beings would be purified for the last resurrection. This would be the universal salvation. But the idea of the universal salvation contradicts the double ending of the last judgment where the sinners "are thrown into the lake of fire" and not redeemed.

Moltmann investigates both endings.³⁶⁶ Biblically seen, the universal salvation and the double ending of the last judgment are possible. An argument for the universal salvation is that both the last judgment and damnation as well as final death will happen in the last days, but they will not last forever, since Rev 21:5 emphasizes that *everything* will be created anew. Another argument for the universal salvation is God's overwhelming grace over human sinfulness (cf. Rom 5:20f). In the last judgment, God differentiates between sin and the person himself. God will condemn the sin but acquit the person. God's wrath is against human sin, but not against humans themselves. God has for a long time shown appreciation of humans; they are God's creation who is created in God's image. God judges the sins of the world in order to save the world and God's grace "will last for a lifetime" (Ps 30:6). God's wrath is an expression of God's overwhelming love for humans. Thus it becomes clear that the last judgment will not have a double ending but will be the means for God's accomplishment of righteousness and re-creation of "all things" (Rev 21:5).³⁶⁷ Moltmann emphasizes that with this view of God's grace being stronger than God's wrath, judgment and reconciliation are no opposites anymore. "Die Versöhnung des Alls geschieht durch das Weltgericht, in welchem Gott seine zurechtbringende, rechtschaffende Gerechtigkeit offenbart, um alle und alles in das Reich seiner Herrlichkeit zu versammeln."³⁶⁸

On the other hand, the argument that this universal salvation would make God's grace to "cheap grace" since salvation would come in anyway and for anyone, thus determining God's freedom, speaks for the double ending of the last judgment. This view has its emphasis on the possibility, but not on the reality, of salvation. Salvation can only happen through faith, and

³⁶⁴ Cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 263f.

³⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.* 264.

³⁶⁶ Moltmann elaborates this in: *Das Kommen Gottes*, 268-269.

³⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 271.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

thus belief and non-belief will be God's only criteria in the last judgment.³⁶⁹ This places a lot of responsibility on humans. God is not the "power of fate"³⁷⁰, determining human life without asking them, but God wants to convince humans by the power of the gospel. God wants to lead them with a free decision to faith. With this view, God saves humans not through overcoming but by conviction. God humiliates himself so much and makes himself dependent on human decision, showing thus the mutual character of human faith and divine salvation. God respects the human decision with their belief and non-belief and reflects this in the last judgment by giving everyone according to one's faith.³⁷¹

After these reflections on universal salvation and the double ending of the last judgment, the question between both "solutions" is whether it is up to humans or to God to make the crucial decision for the salvation. Whereas the model of the universal salvation emphasizes God's power to have the last decision, the model of the double ending has enormous self-confidence in humans since their decision for belief or non-belief is crucial for their final salvation. And this is exactly the point where Moltmann criticizes this model. Since in this model a human decision will be decisive in the last judgment, the model reduces God's function to the offer of salvation in the gospel and the final statement of salvation or punishment in the judgment.³⁷² Within the model of the double ending, humans in the end make their own decisions over their fate after death, and thus they take God's place. But it is central in the Christian faith that God is the one who decides over the final salvation, and thus humans cannot make any decision in terms of their own salvation.³⁷³ Moreover, they cannot even decide over their belief or non-belief but it is God who provides it. Their faith does not come through a personal decision but through God's salvation.³⁷⁴ It is impossible to see God and humans on the same level.

Having these reflections in mind, the final judgment is not comparable with a normal human court of law where those who failed during their lives will be condemned and those who lived according to the law are saved. The last judgment is rather the overcoming of human law. It is

³⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.* 270f.

³⁷⁰ Moltmann calls this power "Schicksalsmacht" (*ibid.* 271).

³⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.* 272.

³⁷² Cf. *ibid.*

³⁷³ Stock expresses this as follows: "Nimmt das göttliche Richten die Verantwortung der Person für die geschichtlichen Subjekte in Anspruch, so ist doch die göttliche Entscheidung über ihren Erfolg oder ihr Scheitern innerhalb des geschichtlichen Zeiterlebens unserem Verstehen entzogen." (Stock, Art. "Gericht Gottes, Dogmatisch", 738).

³⁷⁴ "Glaube ist das persönliche Erfahren und Empfinden dieser Wendung [zum Heil], aber nicht diese Wendung selbst. Nicht mein Glaube schafft mir Heil, sondern das Heil schafft mir Glauben. [...] Gottes Entscheidung ‚für uns‘ und unsere Entscheidungen zum Glauben oder Unglauben liegen so wenig auf einer Ebene wie Ewigkeit und Zeit." (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 273). The question remains whether God predestains human fates by giving them belief or non-belief.

not the law of retribution³⁷⁵ which will create justice, but it is God himself who reversed this system. In Christ God became human and suffered at the cross, thus becoming the accused who suffered for the sake of humans. Christ reversed the power-system between the powerful God and the weak human in becoming the weak God at the cross. In Christ we see that God is sided with the suffering and the afflicted. In Christ, God created justice for the unrighteous³⁷⁶ through God's being at the very deepest point of human existence. This is God's justice by which God will judge the world at the end of the days. The last judgment is not the end, but is instead the beginning of God's kingdom. Since Christ suffered deeply at the cross, he went through all the "lakes of fires" of human suffering; he literally went through hell in order to attain the reconciliation of the world.³⁷⁷ God will not condemn humans forever since God himself experienced human damnation. God will finally establish eternal righteousness on earth. Evil has no chance and no life anymore. Despite the experience of evil, God will finally be stronger than evil.³⁷⁸ Where death seemed to have the upper hand, Jesus was resurrected from death. Where faith is robbed of all hope, the fate of Jesus opens up new possibilities.³⁷⁹ We believe in Christ who is stronger than death. God is the God of life. This is the reason why we can believe that God as judge will not send humans into the deepest forlornness but will save them for the kingdom to come.³⁸⁰ We can trust that God will wash away the tears in the end and that God will see our suffering. Christ will not change his face. Christ, the judge of the great and the small, of the victims and perpetrators, will do away with the suffering; Christ will bring them out of the dominion of evil into the community³⁸¹ of God's righteousness. Coming from Christ's resurrection, we have the hope for our own resurrection and overcoming of the last judgment. "Suffering and death are overcome by resurrection and everlasting life, and evil is overcome by the last judgment"³⁸². We do not need to fear the end. This is the reason why the Christian faith is not a faith where fear – Körtner calls it anxiety – should be proclaimed³⁸³, as it has been done throughout history.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁵ The "lex talionis" (cf. Ex 21:23-25), according to the principle "suum cuique".

³⁷⁶ Cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 278.

³⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 279.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Hellholm, Art. "Apokalypse", 587.

³⁷⁹ Cf. Körtner, *The End of the World*, 259.

³⁸⁰ "Die wahre christliche Begründung der Hoffnung auf Allversöhnung ist die Kreuzestheologie, und die einzig realistische Konsequenz aus der Kreuzestheologie ist die Wiederbringung aller Dinge." (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 279).

³⁸¹ Cf. also Stock who speaks of God's judgment as "ausgerichtet auf das Ziel der ewigen Gemeinschaft Gottes mit seiner Schöpfung." (Stock, Art. "Gericht Gottes, Dogmatisch", 738).

³⁸² Witherington III, *Revelation*, 40.

³⁸³ Körtner emphasizes that this is not what Jesus intended. The church should not proclaim anxiety as path to Christian proclamation, and she should not proclaim the Christian faith as path to the elimination of anxiety, since anxiety is an anthropological constant (cf. Körtner, *The End of the World*, 242).

³⁸⁴ Cf. Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 262.

With this view, the last judgment loses its frightening aspect. It is the trust that God, the suffering God at the cross, will not condemn but free at the last judgment. It is the view which comes from the perspective of the victims. The injustice which the victims have to suffer cries to heaven. Victims – and their perpetrators as well – have no rest. They are longing for reconciliation, for justice and righteousness, for a world where justice would finally triumph over evil, as a kind of counter-history to the world.³⁸⁵ Moltmann emphasizes that the purpose of the last judgment is not reward or punishment but the victory of the divine creative righteousness and justice. This victory leads to God's day of reconciliation.³⁸⁶

Looking at the last judgment not as final condemnation but instead seeing its possible impact on everyday life, we will find that God's victory over evil and God's immense orientation towards reconciliation between all people, the great and the small, the victims and the perpetrators, is reason for hope. Hope that the present circumstances of oppression and the present relationships of non-balance between the victims and the perpetrators will not have the last word. This encourages humans to see the present time as place of God's lordship, and it entails the implication that God is the judge and therefore humans are not supposed to judge each other. God being the judge of the world is also expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: "He will come again to judge the living and the dead".

Since Christ has revealed himself in the present time of sinfulness, the world is not restricted by its transitoriness.³⁸⁷ The world is not determined as nothing but has received huge esteem through Christ coming into this world. This expresses God's love and high regard for the world.³⁸⁸ Christ's coming into this world encourages us to take care for the world and to live in faith, hope and love. A life in this hope means that we as humans are able to live and act in our time against all realistic prospects of success in God's righteousness and peace.³⁸⁹ This does not mean that we will no longer undergo suffering and pain, but we can trust that God is with us in this suffering. This suffering is not God's final aim with the world. Moltmann emphasizes that in the end of the world lies a new beginning, because we know

³⁸⁵ Cf. Moltmann, *In The End*, 141.

³⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 143.

³⁸⁷ Cf. Evers, Dirk, Art. "Weltende, Dogmatisch", in: RGG⁴, Tübingen 2005, Vol. 8, 1438.

³⁸⁸ Ackermann comments on this topic: "It is ironic that the Christian tradition which has been so wary of the body is in fact a faith that is incarnational. The Christian belief that 'the body became flesh and lived amongst us' is a statement of faith that God became 'embodied' as one of us. [...] Incarnation is about meeting God in the body." (Ackermann, Denise M., *After the Locusts. Letters from a Landscape of Faith*. Michigan, Cambridge: 2003, 79).

³⁸⁹ Moltmann expresses this as follows: "Leben aus dieser Hoffnung heißt dann, gegen den Augenschein und gegen alle geschichtlichen Erfolgsaussichten jeder Welt der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens schon heute und hier entsprechend zu handeln." (Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes*, 262).

that God calls people out of nothing and created new life out of death.³⁹⁰ Thus he emphasizes not on the last judgment as last event to come but on God's willingness to create everything anew. This new creation is God's aim behind the last judgment. Evil and death will be destroyed in it and the sinners will be saved from their sinful being. „Es ist eine Quelle unendlich tröstender Freude zu wissen, daß die Mörder nicht nur nicht endgültig über ihre Opfer triumphieren werden, sondern sie nicht einmal in Ewigkeit die Mörder ihrer Opfer bleiben können.“³⁹¹

III. 4. Draft of a sermon on Rev 20:11-15

Introduction: The sermon will start with a short outline of a normal human court: the guilty have to confess and receive their sentence, the innocent go free. Our understanding of a court knows only the guilty and innocent, the victim and the perpetrator, the good and bad. We have clear images of how just and unjust people look like – and we know other models of judgment, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Connection with text: Rev 20:11-15 will be read out. First, the preacher will stress familiar aspects like the rewarding of the good and the punishment of the bad. In addition, the sermon will elucidate the differences between Rev 20:11-15 and a normal court. The most important differences are in terms of place, time and characters.

- Place: The text mentions the disappearance of both Earth and Heaven, thus referring to a place which is not imaginable anymore for earthly inhabitants.
- Time: The last judgment will happen at the end of days, when all the dead will be raised for the judgment. The place and time are beyond human understanding and this could serve as an allusion to the reality that human measures are not applicable in this scenery.
- Characters: Not only all dead, regardless of social and political position, age, deeds, race, religion etc. are standing before the throne but abstract “characters” like Death and Hades are also judged.

Different possible reactions of the audience: The sermon will continue by drawing some examples of different possible reactions to the text. This intends to make the audience aware of the text's dualism. It gives them the possibility to “place” themselves in these reactions.

- An initial reaction might be approval of the condemnation and punishment of the unrighteous and the reward of the righteous. This kind of thinking mirrors a typical

³⁹⁰ “Man kann nur darauf vertrauen, dass auch im Weltende ein neuer Anfang verborgen liegt, wenn man dem Gott vertraut, der aus dem Nichts ins Dasein ruft und aus dem Tod neues Leben schafft.“ (Ibid. 261).

³⁹¹ Ibid. 284.

pattern of thinking in our societies: there are only good and bad, righteous and unrighteous people in the world. The world needs a neutral judge who creates justice. The sermon can elaborate on this dualism of thinking. In order to allow the world / market / society to function, the pattern of black and white, bad and good, devil and angel have been well adopted.

- Another reaction to the text will probably be disapproval, in connection with questions concerning the text: who will be able to survive the last judgment? What are the criteria of this judgment? How is it possible to make more efforts for passing the judgment? This reaction might be full of frustration because the audience would probably try for some time to live a “true Christian life” but will still be struggling with it. Thus Rev 20:11-15 does not comprise “good news” since it is the announcement of the damnation.
- The sermon should raise some questions which might be asked by the audience, e.g. the question of the powerful image of God. How does this fit together with Jesus’ message of grace? Did God come into the world, in order to be the outside observer in the last judgment? Along with these reflections, the preacher must be aware that a part of the audience might be familiar with the proclamation of the end of the world. Thus, the reading of Rev 20:11-15 could provoke anxiety. The question remains, if this fear of the end of the world and its judgment is intended by the text.

Historical background: In order to find out if this fear raised by the text is intentional, the sermon will elaborate on the historical background of the book of revelation. This overview will show that the book of Revelation was written to the Christians in the Roman Empire who were confronted with persecution due to their Christian faith. The intention of the book of Revelation was thus to show that their suffering would not last forever but that God would bring final justice to victims and perpetrators. Thus the text is not intended to be a text of fear but a text of hope for the victims, of hope for those believing in God. The sermon will describe that the last judgment was a way of dealing with the question of theodicy, of how to bring the loving, almighty God and the experience of earthly persecution together.

Connection with our world of persecution: The sermon will continue by connecting the text with our world of persecution. Even though we do not have an imperial cult anymore, we live in other situations of persecution as Christians, such as the complete lack of understanding of society, or oppression by the government. The sermon will outline some situations of persecution where people are suffering and are unable to change their situation.

Description of longing for justice: In situations of suffering, people are often longing for a mighty power that is able to change their situation and to make things right and just. The

sermon will describe this deep longing for final justice and reconciliation, a longing for a God who will not judge, but understand, who will not continue with drawing only “good / bad – pictures” of humans but will make an end to it and see the human being as a whole. This is the deep longing from the perspective of the victims for being accepted and loved in a way which exceeds good or bad deeds.

New creation: The judgment itself is not the end of the book of Revelation, but it continues with God’s new creation (Rev 21:5) for which people are longing deeply. The sermon will emphasize this aspect of the last judgment: it is not the last but the penultimate event which will occur. The judgment is described as a means to overcome evil and death. The sermon will draw the connection of the last judgment and the death of Death (God being stronger than death) with Christ’s death and resurrection. It will summarize that Christ’s death, the deepest point of human existence, is the overcoming of the power-system between the powerful God and the weak human being, thus creating new possibilities for humans. Since Christ came for the weak, he will not condemn them for ever but lead them into his new world.

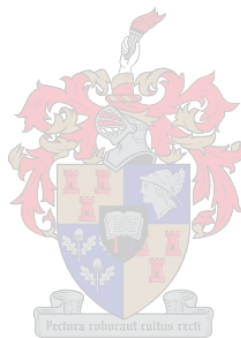
Impact on daily life: The text emphasizes very strongly God’s lordship over the world. The sermon will underline that human works will not contribute to human fate after death but that God will be the only judge. The preacher will encourage his/her audience not to judge in their daily life because it is up to God “to judge the living and the dead” (Creed). God does not judge according to human criteria since God is beyond human understanding.

The last judgment as story of hope: With this view on the last judgment from the perspective of Christ the God at the cross and coming from the perspective of the victims, the audience today might see some hopeful aspects of the last judgment. The sermon will summarize these aspects:

- Christ will not condemn the dead standing before the throne since he himself was condemned at the cross on behalf of all.
- Since Christ is the Lord over the living and the dead, it is not up to humans to judge others. This will free humans from judging others and being judged by their fellow human beings.
- Finally, God will create justice for all people. The victims and perpetrators of the earth will not be any longer victims and perpetrators in heaven. God will create final reconciliation in the relationships between human beings, between victims and perpetrators.

- The last judgment is not the ultimate but the penultimate event to come. We can trust God that God will see our suffering and wash away the tears, and that evil and death will be no longer.
- The last judgment does not have the intention of bringing fear and destruction but rather to save and make things right and to bring God's new creation. It is God's "no" to all destructive powers.³⁹²

Conclusion: The sermon will conclude with the remark that God's work, God's judgment and redemption is beyond human understanding. We try to understand a lot but we will only be able to grasp a touch of God's kingdom. The description of the last judgment is no literal description but human understanding of God's work. The sermon will conclude with the comfort that no one of us will see the truth now, but we will only in the end understand it fully.



³⁹² Cf. Moltmann, In The End, 144f.

IV. Conclusion: Preaching about the last judgment?

My initial question was how it is possible to preach on texts about the last judgment without missing the centre of the Christian message. I questioned whether the message of the last judgment contradicted the good news of the merciful God. I asked how it is possible to reach people in our days with texts about the last judgment. For this reflection, I will first look back at the way I went with Luk 16 and Rev 20 in order to come to the draft of a sermon. In a second step, I will describe in a more general way the different approaches I used in order to become more familiar with the world of the text and how this helped me for the draft of the sermon. Finally, I will conclude the assignment with a survey at the questions I asked in the introduction. Did I come in the course of writing the assignment to answers in the course of writing the assignment? What do they look like? I will try to answer them by connecting the last chapter of the assignment with its content and its very beginning.

IV. 1. My approaches to Luk 16:19-31 and Rev 20:11-15

IV. 1. a. Luk 16:19-31

When I first read Luk 16:19-31, I had a rough picture that it was about the last judgment. I was interested in working on it, but I was also afraid: what, if the result of the exegetical work will be of true, graceless judgment? What does this judgment look like? What is the image the text draws about God and the afterlife? Is this in contradiction with the gospel and what does the description of the afterlife imply for a life in our days? In order to get a deeper understanding of the text, I started with exegetical reflections about Luk 16.

It made sense to me that I started with the translation, the textual criticism and the text's structure since this helped me to find my way around in the text. If I may compare it with a map of a town: only after having walked through the streets of the town, the visitor will be able to say that s/he knows her/his way around.

In the following exegetical steps (textual analysis and contextual analysis) I learned that the topic of the use of money is found throughout chapter 16. Furthermore, the notes in verses 14-18 before the beginning of the parable were an eye-opener for me. I realized that the following parable, addressed to the Pharisees as those who misinterpret the law, serves as elaboration of these verses although it is not explicitly mentioned in the parable itself. This information was later on helpful for the draft, since I understood that the parable expressed

the complete reverse of the Pharisees' world in terms of wealth and poverty and its connection of being blessed or cursed.

In the elaboration of the historical context it was important to me to understand how the people at that time understood poverty, its connection to sin, their ancestors, scripture and faith. Only with this background could I relate the text's descriptions of wealth and poverty with its essential meaning. It helped me to understand that the parable is about a social lifestyle according to Scripture and the (mis-)interpretation of Scripture rather than about the last judgment. Its results were of importance for the draft since I could now connect the theological misunderstanding of Scripture at Jesus' time (theological justification of the rich) with theological misinterpretations of the recent past of Germany and South Africa.

Working with the history of religion showed very clearly that this parable was not new to the audience. The fact that Jesus used the basic structures of a folktale which was most probably known to his audience and added some new aspects showed me the importance of these new aspects. In the draft later on I underlined this new aspect: the reversal of fortunes even for the Pharisees whose fate was not supposed to be reversed.

In the ensuing homiletical reflection I could outline some questions and fears the text might evoke. I worked on the self-justification of the Pharisees to be self-righteous in their behaviour and the understanding and misinterpretation Scripture both in the past and in our days with its consequences of theological justification of discrimination and exclusion. In addition, I looked at the dream people of a just world with equal structures. This reflection was important for the draft because it showed me that the parable mentions important topics such as the misinterpretation of Scripture which are still of relevance today.

Having come to the understanding that the parable of Luk 16:19-31 is about the call for just and equal relationships amongst people with relation to Scripture, I emphasized in the systematic reflection on God's preferential option for the poor and its consequences in people's lives. I had a closer look at the covenant between God and God's people in which we are justified through our faith. By this, we are able to act according to Scripture. Furthermore, the covenant is about the relationship between God and humans and relationships between humans within the covenant. Thus, no one is excluded from the covenant. This allows us not only to be free from judging others since the judgment is up to God but also to become involved with the well-fare of others. In this sense, the parable is a call for equality. This reflection was useful for the writing of the draft because I could include theological insights in the sermon.

With these reflections in mind, I was able to write a draft of a sermon on Luk 16:19-31 which is not moralistic but has the call for equality within relationships without doing this for one's own justification. I had discovered that the parable is actually not mainly about the last judgment but Luke's way to talk about the right interpretation of Scripture and its impact on human lives. Thus the parable does not talk to the dead but to the living. It calls everyone not to judge others but to live in equal relationships. Because God himself is on the side of the poor and the suffering, we are called to become involved with the struggle for equality. With this approach, I think I do not preach fear, punishment or moralistic attitudes but the loving God who is with and for the poor and who justifies us through our faith. By this we will be able to lead a life in engagement for the weak and the poor.

IV. 1. b. Rev 20:11-15

Similar to Luk 16, I had many questions about Rev 20:11-15 when I started working on it. These were questions on the nature of the last judgment which is portrayed differently in Revelation than in Luke. I had the question whether this time I might discover the graceless God behind the world, who was busy writing people's names in the book of life, and who could then, at the day of the last judgment, condemn or redeem the dead according to their deeds. I questioned whether and how this picture of the powerful God fits into the picture of the weak God, Christ at the cross. I questioned God's grace who would merciless throw those into the lake of fire who would not be written into the book of life which was probably written by himself and who would thus not allow any human freedom but preordain people's fate. I questioned the ethical implications for humans; I questioned whether a "good" ethical behaviour during the earthly life would lead to final redemption and who would define the "right" amount of good deeds.

Having these questions in mind I started with translation, structure and textual criticism in order to gain a deeper understanding of the text. The textual analysis led me through the text; it allowed me to ask new questions and follow the text's inner structure. It was important for me to see that the text itself is not easy to understand and that a closer look at the text does not solve all problems of understanding, e.g. the twofold mention of the judgment or the criteria for being written into the book of life.

The analysis of the closer and wider context of Rev 20 helped me to understand that is well-embedded in its context – in terms of language as well as in terms of the theme. This analysis was important for the draft of the sermon since it became clear that the text should be seen in

the context of the whole book – and with this the historical background of the entire book receives importance since it deals as a whole book with the theme of judgment. Furthermore, the readers of Revelation will see that the book only ends with chapter 22. Thus the fact that the last judgment is not the last event, but rather the new creation in Rev 21 which will reveal God's kingdom on earth, became important to me. In the draft, I connected the audience with the new creation and tried to focus on the new beginning after the last judgment, rather than on the final character of the judgment itself.

In the following exegetical steps I worked on genre and form of the text. It made sense to me that the text was almost completely in line with the typical description of the genre and form of an apocalypse, thus underlining the cosmic and temporal dimensions of the text going beyond human imagination. This was important for the draft of the sermon in which I mentioned the unimaginable place of the judgment and the idea of the end of the world coming from such apocalyptic writings.

As a next step I had a close look at the historical background of the book of Revelation. I discovered that the book has been written to Christians suffering from persecution due to their Christian faith. This was helpful to know since it changed the mood of the judgment. From this moment on, I did not see the last judgment as a form of moral advice or a fear-giving story but rather as story of hope for the victims of persecution who should finally receive justice by God. This was an eye-opener for me. I saw that we all tend to read texts through our own lenses (because we cannot do otherwise) but this does not necessarily meet the author's view on reality. Only by taking his (i.e. John's) standpoint, I could understand that the last judgment was not intended to produce fear of God (on the part of the suffering Christians to whom Revelation is addressed) and a "good" ethical behaviour but to raise hope, that the almighty God will do things right in the end. The description of the last judgment was meant as reinforcement of Christ's lordship over history. I understood that it was also an attempt to deal with the question of theodicy – which has always been a question in history. With this historical context in mind, the text draws a completely different picture of God: it is rather the picture of the merciful God who is interested in those who suffer on earth and who will create justice instead of the picture of a God on the outside who barely cares about humans.

In the following step I looked at the different motifs in the text. The study of the motifs of the book of life and the books of deeds showed clearly that this theme has been repeated in some religions throughout history. This was also the result of my study of the history of religion. The idea of the last judgment with the motif of different books was not new for the

audience at John's time. In the same way, I realized, is it not new for the contemporary audience. They are quite familiar with the idea of the judgment and books in which their earthly deeds are recorded so that they will probably not be surprised about this motif. In the draft, I could therefore work with the assumption that the audience was familiar with the happening.

In the following homiletical reflection I realized that the notion of the last judgment is still very present in (at least) the South African society whereas in the German context the lectionaries had avoided to preach on this text although the idea of the last judgment is approximately similarly spread in Germany as in South Africa. In applying the dualistic characteristics of Rev 20 on our societies, I noticed that many people often restrict themselves because they judge themselves in a similar way by putting one another into a certain scheme. But in all this judgment, people have the longing for the end of judgment and a new creation to come. These homiletical reflections were an important groundwork for the draft because they gave an insight into the basic mood in which contemporary audiences would listen to the text.

The ensuing systematic reflection helped me to understand the systematic concept of the last judgment. These reflections were an important part of the work and part of it took shape in the draft. I understood the different concepts of the last judgment's ending: the concept of universal salvation and the concept of the double ending; the first emphasizing God's grace, the latter human's responsibility. But since in my opinion humans are not able to work for their salvation, I support the model of universal salvation. I do this also because I understood that the last judgment is not comparable with a normal human court since God is with the suffering and reversed at the cross the power-system between the powerful God and the helpless victim. Thus, and because the text has been written in order to give hope to oppressed Christians, the text is a text of hope for the victims. I understood that one can interpret Rev 20:11-15 with human measures (e.g. white – black; good – bad etc.) but one should not forget that the text goes beyond human imagination, and thus always one should ask the question whether we fix God within our human measure or not. I comprehended furthermore that the last judgment lost its frightening aspect since God was stronger than death at the cross and is also able to throw even Death into the lake of fire (cf. Rev 20:14).

After all these reflections I tried to write the draft. I came to another understanding of the last judgment than I had in the beginning and therefore I was not afraid of being forced to proclaim the merciless, judging God. But still the question remained for me whether and how verse 15 could be taken seriously and best understood. Instead of focusing on this question in

the draft, I had a wider look at the whole of the last judgment. I tried take into account the audience's way of understanding when I began this work. Thus, the sermon does not proclaim the merciless judgment of an almighty God, but emphasizes on the aspect of hope for the victims. The fact, that the last judgment is not the end of the book of Revelation but the new creation diminishes its seriousness as being the last event to come in the world. It stresses God's power which is stronger than death. After having done the work on Rev 20:11-15, I know that my approach is only one of many possible approaches and that I did not solve all questions.

IV. 2. General outline of my approaches

In order to have a more general perspective on my approaches to a sermon on the last judgment, I will outline the most essential approaches I used in the assignment. I will call these different approaches the textual and contextual approach, the rhetorical and the historical approach, the theological and the homiletical approach.

First of all, it was an important experience to me to dip into the text itself. In order to get a deeper understanding of the text, a good exegesis is of crucial importance. It is important to work with the Greek text and translate it, ask questions at the text itself and to understand its structure in terms of grammar and content. The exegesis has to work with the use of symbolic terms, figures or myths in terms of their origin and in comparison to other cultures and religions. This will be of importance for the sermon because it will tell the preacher to what extent the audience of the time of writing was familiar with the material. In thus way the preacher will be able to connect the audiences' world of the present with the world of the past in explaining its function. In this textual approach, the preacher has to look at keywords and its use not only in the specific text but in the book and the whole Bible. In summery, it is of crucial importance to understand the world of the time of writing as much as possible in terms of language, its special application and symbols.

Since every text is written in a certain textual context, it cannot be taken out of it. Therefore the contextual approach works on questions on the context of the text as well as of the context of the whole book and its placing in the Bible. This approach tries to connect the text with its previous and following texts in the book. It figures out whether and how the text fits in terms of content, language and the use of (key-)words in the entire book. The contextual approach works with the author's intention in writing the book and has a closer look at the aim of the book. This investigation is important in order to get a deeper and holistic understanding of the

text and its integration in its context. This might be useful for a sermon because the placing of a text explains much about the author's aim in writing the text and to whom he spoke. This might be useful for the sermon in order to help the audience to understand the text in its context and to avoid seeing it as isolated text.

Closely connected to the contextual approach is the rhetorical approach. This approach seeks to understand the writer's intention when he wrote the text. What was the author's rhetorical purpose in view of the text's recipients? What effects does the text intend to have on the audience which might be not named but are present in the text? What did the text anticipate accomplishing in the lives of its receivers, and how did it hope to do this? Furthermore, the genre of the text as well as the genre of the whole book should be considered. This approach might be useful for a sermon because it stresses the intended reaction to the text on the reader's part. In a sermon, the rhetorical approach can be used in order to explain the text's function and purpose.

With the historical approach I tried to see the text and the author in its historical time, the time of writing. Therefore it is important to find out to whom the text was addressed to, the contextual situation of the readers, how Christians and members of other religions were perceived in society and what the political situation looked like. This closer look at the historical context will elucidate why the author had to emphasize the last judgment in his specific context. The text's context is to a certain extent part of the text itself because it shaped the text's writing and is may even be a reason for the origin of the text. For this reason the texts about the last judgment cannot simply be taken out of their historical context and transferred into another context. For a sermon, the understanding of the time of writing, the writer and the implied audience might be essential because it elucidates the text in a different manner. An understanding of the historical context will most probably clarify many questions of the audience about the text and also assist a theological understanding.

With the theological approach I was concerned about the author's theological aim in writing the text. This is the question which the author wants to underline by writing about the last judgment. The question on the theological topic of the text asks what the author wants to emphasize and why? Is the text's topic the last judgment or does the author emphasize other topics like e.g. Scripture, faith, Christology or the question of theodicy? What is the text's main theological theme? How does the text see role and nature of God? It is essential to find out how the author differed in his opinion and belief from other opinions and beliefs. These reflections are important for a sermon because they determine the sermon's topic. Once the preacher has figured out the theme of the text, s/he can continue with a systematic reflection

on this theme in order to have a deeper insight not only into this theme but to go back to the text and see it in the light of this theme.

The preacher who investigates the text will have to ask the question if and how the outcome of this research in its different approaches differs from his/her first and superficial reflection. This will be important for the homiletical approach which has its aim in interpreting the text in our lives. It entails giving the text a relevant meaning for people in our days. The preacher tries to understand why people in our days are sometimes afraid of a text on the last judgment. The preacher has to be aware of these concerns of the audience in order to be able to preach in a sensitive, intelligible and responsible manner about the last judgment. In the homiletical approach, the preacher tries to give an outline why and how the theme of the text – and not all texts about the last judgment have the theme of the last judgment – can have an influence in the audiences' lives. This homiletical reflection is of importance for the sermon because it tries to include the audiences' impressions and standpoints in the sermon. This understanding will help the preacher to include not only the text's message into the sermon but to combine the text's message with the audiences' understanding of the text and its theme.



IV. 3. General survey of the questions at the beginning

In this chapter, I will look back at the questions I asked in the introduction. Are they still of relevance? Did I find any answers? These were questions on the nature of God, God's power and God's weakness at the cross, and how these two images of God – the loving and the judging God – can be seen together. Furthermore, I asked the questions whether and how ethics, faith and deeds are related and how the idea of the last judgment influences a life on earth. Another question was on the understanding of the judgment, in both its human and divine nature. Finally, many of these questions can be summarized in the core of the problem: the question of interpretation. This is the question of how one understands Scripture and its interpretation.

In the beginning, I asked the question whether the last judgment portrays a picture of God contradicting the merciful God we know from the gospel. The portrayal of the last judgment seems to contradict this image we have of God as loving father and mother who is involved with human lives. With the first view, the last judgment portrays the image of a strict, powerful and merciless God. It portrays God as judge who stands outside of human lives, observing their lives and judging them according to their deeds after death. But after having a

closer look at two texts about the last judgment I changed my view. After the second view, I found out that the texts (Luk 16 and Rev 20) are not necessarily about what they look like on the very first superficial view. The second view showed me a different picture of God. In the following paragraph I will elaborate this picture with the examples of Luk 16 and Rev 20.

In Luk 16 I discovered that the text's main interest is not about the afterlife and the individual judgment but about the present life on earth. Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees who deeply believed being on the "right" side with their belief that God blesses the rich and condemns the poor. With this attitude they excluded the poor. Jesus contradicted them by telling this parable. The parable underlines that the judgment is up to God alone, not to humans. The parable emphasizes the reversal of human fates: blessing and curse, poverty and wealth, health and sickness are reversed. And, more importantly, it shows God's empathy for the underprivileged, for the afflicted and the poor. This portrays a picture of a God who cares about the suffering. This is exactly the emphasis the parable wants to set: it is about God's care for the poor and at the same time it speaks to the wealthy. It mentions the understanding of Scripture as central topic which has to go together with the "right" deeds. With this understanding of Luk 16, the picture of the merciless God, standing over the individuals to judge them, disappears.

On the first view, Rev 20 portrays God's merciless power in a much more powerful way than Luk 16. This portrayal sees only God's merciless side, especially when the audience takes the text out of its context and places it without reflection in their own context.

But after a closer look at the text's historical background and its apocalyptic genre, I discovered God's other side being as well portrayed in the text. This shows God's empathy with and for the victims: Christians who are persecuted and oppressed in their earthly lives. This side of the story of the last judgment reveals God's caring side and commitment to the weak. It reveals at the same time the author's (and probably also the people's) conviction and faith that God is the just God who will create justice in the end.

By having a closer look at the text and its context, I discovered the importance of the context of Rev 20 in the whole book. The fact that the story continues after Rev 20 with the new creation gave the last judgment itself another tone: it is not the ultimate but the penultimate event in human history (if one calls the last judgment being part of history). The universal judgment of the dead is not the end of the world, but God's new creation. God's new creation of everyone and everything stands in the end as God's blessing over the whole of human history. This aspect of the new creation emphasizes God's image as creator blessing God's creation.

Another strong emphasis of God's portrayal in Rev 20 is God as the only judge. This entails the invitation for humans not to judge each other but to trust in God as the highest judge. With this implication, people are called to trust in God and not in themselves. This can be experienced as liberating since people are freed from judging each other and from being judged by others.

I asked the question in the beginning whether we can find a kind of "golden thread" running through the Bible which shows us a part of God's nature. I could discover that such a kind of "golden thread" running through the entire Bible can be seen in terms of covenant and law. As kind of leitmotif through the Bible, the texts are concerned with the relationships between God and humans. The texts ask questions concerning humans' origin and destination and meaning and shaping of their lives. In this way they ask and try to give their own answers: the identity of humankind is given in relationship with God. God determines origin, destination and gives shape to people's lifestyles. This aspect of relationship has its roots in the biblical understanding of the covenant between God and God's people. This covenant can be seen to be a "golden thread" which runs through the Hebrew Bible (since Abraham) and the New Testament (through Jesus Christ). In this covenant God reveals himself as a God who cares for the weak and suffering people. God reveals himself as a God of liberation whose intention is to free people from judging each other and being judged by one another. In this way, we find God as the one who wants to be in relationship with God's people. This relationship cannot be seen in terms of equality since God is above human understanding, but in terms of mutuality. Because God is the initiator of the covenant, God's people will live in a way which does not contradict the covenant. This is the law which can be understood as consequence of the covenant between God and God's people and it is part of the "golden thread" running through the Bible.

Even though there might be a lot of unanswered questions in Rev 20 regarding God's grace, we know that God's grace is higher than human understanding, and God's way of revealing himself to us can find many ways which are beyond our understanding. Thus we will never discover the full truth about the last judgment in this life but we can trust that God will always be for us.

I asked the question in the introduction whether "good" ethical behaviour is important for humans in order to come through the last judgment, and if so how. Even though this might be obvious for everyone on the first superficial reading, I discovered that this topic is not so easy to deal with.

Luk 16 is shaped by its reversal character. The text cannot be understood as instruction on how people are supposed to lead their lives in order to get what they are supposed to receive – like the Pharisees did – but it is a call to live life in accordance with one's faith in the covenant with God. This is a call for equal structures on earth and for an engagement against discrimination and inequality. The parable has its emphasis rather on the call for “good” ethical behaviour than on the consequences of an unethical lifestyle after death. One has to be aware that the parable does not give specific instructions how to come to Abraham's bosom after death but it encourages everyone to live in harmony with Christ's ministry on earth – as engagement for the poor and the suffering. Finally, the parable emphasizes that one should live on earth in a non-judgmental way.

So the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is, according to my understanding, not about doing the “right” or “wrong” deeds in order to be saved – this would be justification by works – but it is about a live which involves heart and deeds and thus faith is supposed to have consequences in one's live. This does not entail that one is being judged in terms of salvation according to one's deeds.

The description of the last judgment in Rev 20 seems to place its emphasis on a call for “good” ethical behaviour in order not to be thrown into the lake of fire. But one thing is confusing in this description: the book of life. Even though the text mentions several times that the people are judged according to their deeds, it mentions as well that only those who are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. Good ethical behaviour is not a guarantee for being saved in the end, because what finally counts is not the book of deeds but the book of life. The text does not mention any criterion for being written in the book of life which seems to be decisive for the final fate. Finally, we can only say that it is not up to humans to judge but to God and God does not judge according to human criteria.

Rev 20 portrays the judgment for all dead, but has been written in order to comfort those who suffered during their lifetime. The text does not mention that those who suffered have always done the “right” thing in their lives but it receives a high ethical aspect through its dualism. One can look at Rev 20 from two different angles: from the angle of the victims and the angle of the perpetrators. When I looked at Rev 20 from the angle of the victims I saw that is not a moralizing text because it has its emphasis on the victim's comfort. But when I looked at it from the angle of the perpetrators I realized that it moralizes strongly – trying to make people do the “right” ethical things in order to receive eternal life. In my opinion, the emphasis in Rev 20 lies more on the comfort for the victims than on the threat of punishment for those who do not behave ethically correct.

With this view at Rev 20 from two different angles, I saw that the portrayal of the last judgment is a transfer of the human understanding of judgment providing justice for everyone. But these measures must not be understood as general norms since they are written down by humans, not by God. They have to be seen as being spoken into a certain context. For this reason, the different descriptions in the whole Bible about the last judgment differ strongly in content, genre and theology and none of them can be applied as normative rule for the afterlife. What these texts have in common is the emphasis on God as judge and the call for humans not to judge each other. The text underlines God's lordship over earth and heaven, over life and death, over human history and the last judgment in the same way. It expresses clearly that God alone has power over salvation or non-salvation, thus underlining the human inability to judge in a final instance.

In the introduction, I asked the question whether and how the texts about the last judgment can have an impact on our lives. First of all, I realized that these texts do not talk to the dead but to the living. They are not meant to describe an inflexible and fixed situation after death but they have a certain aim with the people to whom they speak to – thus trying to make them aware of God's work not only with the dead and in the afterlife but already in the earthly life. In Luk 16, the text invites people to live their faith according to Scripture and not to judge others. The texts wants to recall that living one's faith is not about a certain rule which leaves the neighbour behind but it is about the community of believers in God's covenant. Thus, no one is supposed to be excluded from the covenant. Rev 20 wants to have another impact in the lives of the living: it tries to give hope and comfort that suffering will not continue at the end of time for those who had to suffer during their earthly lives. In this way Rev 20 implicitly tries to give response to the question of theodicy. In a way analogous to Luk 16, it is a call not to judge others since God is Lord over the world and the final judgment will come from God's part.

Another question I asked in the beginning was the question of how one could understand and interpret Scripture in a way which takes Scripture seriously but that would also be able to deal with contradictory texts in the Bible. As I mentioned several times in the assignment, I do not see Scripture being written in one piece by one author. Thus I do not see the Bible as a book which fell from heaven but as a book which has been written by "normal" people who wanted to transfer their experience with God. Thus their writing is always embedded in their textual, contextual, rhetorical, historical and theological context and cannot be taken out of it into our context more than 2000 years later. With this understanding of Scripture we can also explain why some texts in the Bible differ so much from each other. Luk 16 and Rev 20 differ

in their textual, contextual, rhetorical and theological approach as well as in their view on the last judgment. In the same way, every single text about the last judgment has to be considered as own text with its own theological theme.

Preaching about the last judgment in the New Testament? This was the question I asked throughout the entire assignment. I discovered that it is actually possible to preach on the last judgment and to proclaim the merciful God. With the different approaches I outlined in the conclusion (textual, contextual, rhetorical, historical, theological and homiletical approaches) it is possible to get a good insight into the text, the context and its origin and this will be helpful for the sermon.

In writing the assignment there were times when I struggled a lot with the chosen texts and their messages of the last judgment, but at the same time I could also find some answers to the questions I asked in the beginning. Thus I experienced the work on the assignment as enrichment of my theological studies. Although I could not find all answers to the questions, I know that the descriptions of the last judgment are human attempts to give insight into God's nature, the life on earth and the afterlife – and these attempts will always remain human attempts. There will always remain questions on the last judgment and we will always struggle in understanding text, God's grace and people's tasks and deeds.

Thus, we should be aware that our searching for the truth will not be fully revealed in this life. It is the apostle Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians who expresses it beautifully with the imagery of a mirror: "For now I see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1Cor 13:12).

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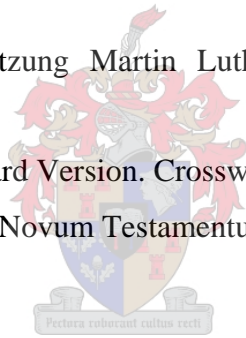
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